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Examining the Activism Experiences of Black Women Graduate Students

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Examining the Activism Experiences of Black Women Graduate Students

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Thelma Lowe. Thank you for being a wonderful, loving, and supportive mother during this journey. Also, I dedicate this dissertation to all the participants in this study. Your experiences have given me inspiration and hope.

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Abstract

Examining the Activism Experiences of Black Women Graduate Students

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The purpose of this study was to examine the activism experiences of Black women graduate students. Understanding how these women defined activism in their terms, as well as factors that influenced their activism, were important topics for investigation. This qualitative investigation employed a phenomenological approach to "discover and describe the meaning or essence of participants' lived experiences, or knowledge as it appears to consciousness" (Hays & Singh, 2014, p. 50). The conceptual framework used for this study was Black feminist thought, expressly the dimensions of Black women's activism (Collins, 2009). One dimension of the framework is struggles for group survival which consist of daily actions within Black women's social spheres to influence change (Collins, 2009). Institutional transformation, the second dimension, involves actions taken to challenge and eliminate discrimination within public institutions (Collins, 2009). In total, there were 17 findings which are as follows: 1) defining activism is complex; 2) activism happens in different ways along a continuum; 3) activism comes with expectations 4) recognizing injustice and understanding identity; 5) learning and

developing the language; 6) observing and testing the waters; 7) performing activism; 8) burnout and introspection; 9) reconciliation and expanded perspectives; 10) activism came with challenges and consequences; 11) personal characteristics shaped their activism; 12) the influence of others shaped their activism; and 13) social media influenced their activism; 14) activism and the student experience was interconnected and inseparable; 15) race and gender influenced their activism; 16) activism required a sacrifice of time and energy; and 17) they gained new skills and knowledge that they passed to others.

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Chapter One - Introduction

Black women in the United States have long been subjected to oppression based on the categories of race, gender and class to name a few, which has contributed to their complex and unique lived experiences (Collins, 2009, Crenshaw, 1989; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Systematic discrimination at the institutional and interpersonal levels have operated simultaneously to disadvantage these women and has significantly influenced their quality of life regarding employment, healthcare, higher education, and housing (Collins, 2009; Neville & Hamer, 2006). Negative images of Black women have also dominated mainstream discourse, maintaining the representation of Black women as inferior, and therefore deserving of a lower position in society (Collins, 2009). The discrimination (i.e., differential treatment of individuals based on a group or category) Black women encounter in society has also influenced Black women graduate students in the higher education setting (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Browne Huntt, 2013).

Black women graduate students on college campuses are exposed to gendered racial microaggressions, or "subtle, everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one's race and gender" (Lewis et al., 2013, p. 54). The negative perceptions of Black women graduate students as less capable have influenced their interactions with faculty, professional staff, and their peers (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Marginalization, isolation, and feelings of invisibility because of race, as well as a lack of institutional support, are additional factors that have contributed to the challenging experiences of Black women graduate students (Alexander & Hermann, 2015). Researchers have made critical contributions concerning the strategies Black women graduate students use to cope with racist and sexist treatment personally.

The strategies used include but are not limited to obtaining support from their families, redefining negative stereotypes of themselves, and turning to their spiritual foundation for guidance (Lewis et al., 2013; Patton & McClure, 2009). Scholars have also investigated the activism students of color in higher education engage in to combat institutional and societal discrimination (DeAngelo, Schuster, & Stebelton, 2016; Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015; Willison, 2016). Additionally, studies have been conducted examining the challenges and success of activist efforts among graduate students in higher education (Lantz et al., 2016) and the activist efforts of Black women graduate students specifically (Robinson, 2013). However, researchers have conducted few investigations about the activism experiences of Black women graduate students at the post-secondary level. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the activism experiences of Black women graduate students in higher education.

This chapter opens with a brief overview of the discriminatory experiences Black women in America have confronted and their impact on Black women faculty, administrators, and graduate students on university campuses. A discussion of how Black women graduate students have sought to mitigate their experiences with racism and sexism in unwelcoming college settings is provided, proceeded by the statement of the problem and purpose of the study. The research questions, and the methodology used, as well as the definition of essential terms, delimitations, and limitations of the study, and underlying assumptions within the research are presented. In closing, the researcher gives the contributions this study made related to the body of scholarship on Black women graduate students.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Throughout history, the social location (i.e., historical position of a group in a society based on multiple identities) of Black women in the lower ranks of society has affected their overall experiences regarding their access to and inclusion in mainstream institutions (Collins, 2009). Anna Julia Cooper, a Black feminist scholar and activist during the Jim Crow era, once argued, "The colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country…She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and it is yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both" (as cited in Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 45). Shirley Chisholm, an American politician, and educator expressed sentiments akin to those of Cooper regarding the commonplace and normalized discrimination against women. During her 1969 address to the United States House of Representatives regarding equal rights for women she stated,

> As a black person, I am no stranger to race prejudice. But the truth is that in the political world I have been far oftener discriminated against because I am a woman than because I am black. Prejudice against blacks is becoming unacceptable although it will take years to eliminate it. But it is doomed because, slowly, white America is beginning to admit that it exists. Prejudice against women is still acceptable. (Chisolm, 1969, para. 5-6)

Although Cooper and Chisholm illuminated these issues concerning women's place in society over a century ago and almost half a century ago respectively, the problems referenced are indeed still applicable to the contemporary status of Black women in America. The convergence of race and gender continues to be a critical factor in understanding the circumstances Black women face.

Crenshaw (1989), in her seminal work on the intersection of race and gender in antidiscrimination law and feminist theory, contended that separating the two categories

as "mutually exclusive" was problematic when analyzing the experiences of Black women (p. 139). She asserted the "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). On an interpersonal level, people of color have encountered racial microaggressions, which are intentional or unintentional, denigrating racial slights, or behaviors towards individuals of color (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions in the lives of Black women send belittling messages to them that they do not belong, that they are abnormal, and that they are intellectually inferior, untrustworthy, and all the same (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). In response, Black women have used a variety of methods to address their subordination including coping strategies, and resisting through their activism (Collins, 2009; Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

Reliance on faith and spirituality, self-love, the internalization of a positive self-image, and support from others are just some of the specific internal and external resources Black women have used to cope with the stress of oppression (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Black women have also actively resisted against obstacles and barriers and have been an integral part of movements across generations to transform their communities (Hall, Garret-Akinsanya, & Hulces, 2007). For centuries, these women have served as leaders or “Black women activists who, from the intersections of race and gender, develop paths, provide a direction, and give voice to Black women” (Hall et al., 2007, p. 283). Collins (2009) noted Black women have responded to oppression with activism, by establishing their own "spheres of influence within existing social structures" and working towards institutional transformation, or changes in mainstream discriminatory policies and procedures (p. 219). Although these efforts have done much to dismantle

unfair practices towards Black women, issues related to racism and sexism continue to infiltrate essential institutions such as higher education.

One such gain for Black women students, particularly graduate students, has been an increase in their overall enrollment in colleges and universities since the 1970s (Smith, 2015). However, for Black women graduate students, deciding to pursue graduate school has itself been challenging (Schwartz, Bower, Rice, & Washington, 2003), and getting accepted into graduate programs has presented as another barrier (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Positive and negative interactions with graduate coordinators during the application process, as well as recruitment efforts, have all influenced the participation, or enrollment, of Black women in graduate education (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). However, support from family, friends, and mentors positively influenced these women and their choice to work towards obtaining their degree (Schwartz et al., 2003). Once in the graduate school setting, Black women have to overcome several stumbling blocks which have negatively influenced their educational experiences.

Unwelcoming environments have frequently been an issue for Black women graduate students, a consequence of gendered racial microagressions as discussed previously (Lewis et al., 2013). The exclusion of these students by their White peers, primarily because of their race, as well as positive and negative interactions with faculty have significantly impacted their time in graduate school (Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2003). While some faculty members have belittled their intellectual abilities, other faculty members, specifically Black women professors have provided much-needed support to encourage their success (Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2003). A lack of institutional support, in the form of resources, advising assistance, and funding, for Black graduate students has further affected how both men and women felt about their educational environment, particularly at predominately White institutions

(Gasman, Hirschfeld, & Vultaggio, 2008). Despite the many issues, Black women graduate students have dealt with during their graduate experience, they, along with their peers, have engaged in activist efforts for institutional change in higher education.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Student activism on college campuses has been an essential component of the student experience in higher education (Rhoads, 2016). During the 1960s, student participation in groups, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and social movements such as the Black Power and Chicano/a movements, fostered a favorable climate of change at universities across the nation (Rhoads, 2016). Student resistance post the sixties encouraged the activism of women, and the emergence of the first gay organizations seeking equality for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students (Rhoads, 2016). Recently, scholars have focused their efforts on examining the current day activism of students at the post-secondary level. These investigations include the activism of students with disabilities, and those seeking to address issues of sexual violence through the use of media (Kimball, Moore, Vaccaro, Troiano, & Newman, 2016; Linder, Myers, Riggle, & Lacy, 2016). Other studies have specifically highlighted the participation of students of color in contemporary social movements (Hope et al., 2016). For example, Hope, Keels, & Durkee (2016), in their qualitative study examining Black and Latino undergraduate student involvement in Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), found an association between high levels of student participation in these movements and higher levels of broader political activism. Activism among students of color has also been a source of empowerment which shapes the development of students' identities (DeAngelo et al., 2016). Some studies have addressed the response of Black women graduate students to the challenges

they encounter in higher education, yet researchers have given less attention to the activism experiences of Black women graduate students.

Researchers have identified several measures, or coping strategies, used by Black women graduate students to lessen the effects of the oppression faced in their programs of study (Lewis et al., 2013; Schwartz et al., 2003; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Shavers and Moore (2014) identified self-presentation strategies Black women doctoral students within a predominately White institution used as self-protection against differential treatment because of their identity (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Such strategies included wearing an "academic mask," characterized by behaving professionally at all times and engaging in "hard work," to hide their true selves from their peers the educational context (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Support from their personal networks, mentors, and their religious faith were additional tools used to mitigate their negative experiences (Schwartz et al., 2003). Black women graduate students have also navigated environments where they were the "token" Black woman. They have done so by presenting a successful or strong image of themselves to hide perceived as weaknesses (Robinson, 2013). Many have taken the agency to address their subjugation through the use of their voices to speak out, or "talk back" against dominant discourses (Robinson, 2013). Fewer scholars have investigated the activism experiences of Black women graduate students within contemporary majority White post-secondary contexts (Robinson, 2013). Therefore, it was imperative to expand our understanding of how these students engaged in activism.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As illustrated, previous studies concerning Black women graduate students, have offered valuable insights into their experiences in higher education (Alexander & Hermann, 2015; Ellis, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Lewis et al., 2013; Williams,

Brewley, Reed, White, & Davis-Haley, 2005). Further, previous research has focused on understanding the methods and strategies these graduate students used to minimize the psychological and personal effects of bigotry (Robinson, 2013; Schwartz et al., 2003; Shavers & Moore, 2014). However, there was still a need to consider the activism experiences of Black women graduate students in the post-secondary context given the limitations of the current research. Understanding how these women conceptualized activism was an important area of investigation. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the activism experiences of Black women graduate students completing programs in predominately White institutions. The examination included understanding how they defined activism, what forms of activism they engaged in, as well as factors that influenced their activism. The subsequent research questions were used to frame this study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The proposed research questions guiding the design and implementation of this study were as follows:

1. How do Black women graduate students at a public predominately White institution (PWI) define activism?
2. How do Black women graduate students at a public PWI describe their activism experiences and those of their peers?
3. What do Black women graduate students at a public PWI perceive as factors that influence their activism?
4. How does the activism of Black women graduate students at a public PWI influence their student experience?

OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was used to investigate the specified research topic (Hays & Singh, 2014). The purpose of this study aligned well with the use of qualitative methods because, according to Hays and Singh (2014), qualitative studies focus on the "how" and "what" facets of a phenomenon. To be more specific, the researcher used a phenomenological approach to address the above research questions. This particular approach was used to "discover and describe the meaning or essence of participants' lived experiences, or knowledge as it appears to consciousness" (Hays & Singh, 2014, p. 50). This study aimed to explore the activism experiences of students from a new perspective, through the eyes of Black women graduate students (Hays & Singh, 2014). The goal of the inquiry was to understand the essence of their experiences as activists, and to explore the meanings they ascribed to activism (Creswell, 2013).

In keeping with the qualitative, phenomenological approach, the researcher used purposeful sampling, meaning "the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). Sampling for the participants in this study was homogenous or included participants with similar characteristics to gather information about one specific subpopulation; Black women graduate students (Hays & Singh, 2014). Snowball sampling or asking of individuals to recruit other individuals they knew, was also be utilized (Creswell, 2013). The site for this study was flagship university in the southwestern region of the United States. The institution was selected based on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education specifications for a Research 1: Doctoral University. This type of university offers "20 research/scholarship doctoral degrees during the update year (this does not include

professional practice doctoral-level degrees, such as the JD, MD, PharmD, DPT, etc.)" (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n. d., para. 3).

Upon IRB approval, participants were selected, and data for the research study commenced. Data was collected using a phenomenological interviewing approach (Seidman as cited in Hays and Singh, 2014). Within this approach, interviews were conducted with participants to garner information regarding their background, to gain details on the research phenomenon itself, and to explore then how the participants made meaning of the particular phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, as the semi-structured approach permitted for flexibility during the data gathering process (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2014). Visualization techniques were also incorporated, as using multiple tools for data collection bolsters the trustworthiness (i.e., validity) of the inquiry process (Hays & Singh, 2014). The researcher engaged in memoing and journaling throughout the interviewing and analysis phase to further establish trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2014).

Data analysis consisted of inductive coding, that is the process of analysis using codes emerging from the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Deductive coding, or coding derived from the theoretical framework, was also utilized (Miles et al., 2014). Three rounds of coding were employed: first cycle pattern coding to identify emerging themes; second cycle coding to group the themes into more concise summaries (Miles et al., 2014); and the third round of coding using the designated theoretical framework. Member checking was accomplished through asking clarifying questions during the interview process, completing multiple interviews, and reviewing data results with participants; these steps also addressed trustworthiness within the study (Hays & Singh, 2014).

DEFINITION OF TERMS

To establish clarity within this study, key terms and definitions that were commonplace within the literature are listed below.

Activism: "Activism consists of efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society" ("Activism," n. d., para 1).

Academic Context: The academic context in this study refers to activities occurring on university premises, or individual participation in activities outside of the physical campus context that are school-related. Examples may include but are not limited to off-campus research endeavors, study abroad trips, online communities, and campus organization initiatives, etc.

Black/African American: A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (United States Census Bureau, 2017). For this study, Black will be the terminology used to describe Black/African American.

Black Women's Activism: According to Collins (2009), Black women's activism encompasses both "struggles for group survival" and "struggles for institutional transformation" (p. 219). Struggles for group survival are "actions taken to create Black female spheres of influence within existing social structures" (p. 219). These actions are not direct challenges to oppressive structures but rely on, for example, "crafting independent and oppositional identities for African-American women" (p. 219). Struggles for institutional transformation are "efforts to change discriminatory policies and procedures of government, schools, the workplace, the media, stores, and other social institutions" (p. 219).

Challenge: A difficult task or problem: something that is hard to do ("Challenge," n. d.)

Discrimination: The act, practice, or an instance of discriminating categorically rather than individually ("Discrimination," n. d.).

Experience: A direct observation of, or participation in events as a basis of knowledge; the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation; something personally encountered, or lived through ("Experience," n. d.).

Factors: Something that helps produce or influence a result: one of the things that cause something to happen ("Factors," n. d.).

Influence: To affect or change (someone or something) in an indirect but usually important way ("Influence," n. d.).

Non-Academic: The non-academic context in this study refers to the engagement of individual participation in settings, groups, or organizations not related to their academic endeavors. Examples may include church organizations, community initiatives, professional work not related to graduate study, etc.

Oppression: "An unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society. Race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity constitute major forms of oppression" (Collins, 2009, p. 320).

Racism: "A system of unequal power and privilege where humans are divided into groups or 'races' with social rewards unevenly distributed to groups based on their racial classification" (Collins, 2009, p. 321).

Subordination: The act of placing someone in a lower rank or position ("Subordination," n. d.)

DELIMITATIONS/LIMITATIONS

One delimitation of the study was it explicitly focused on individuals who identify racially/ethnically as Black, and as a woman. Therefore, those individuals who did not identify as Black, or as a woman or non-binary individual, were not be included as participants. Furthermore, this study did not address the activism experiences of Black women in undergraduate programs. Another delimitation was the research was conducted as a single site study.

Since the proposed research centered around Black women graduate students, one limitation of the study was that the findings might not be generalizable to a larger population of students who identify as other races/ethnicities, genders, or as undergraduate students. The students in this study were also primarily from fields within the social sciences with two representing professional schools. Other disciplines were not represented included areas such as science, technology, and mathematics. Further, data collection took place at one institutional type. Therefore, different campus climates might have impacted the results of this study at other universities.

ASSUMPTIONS

Social struggles present in society are often mirrored in post-secondary educational environments. These challenges have primarily impacted the level of educational access, persistence, and the degree attainment of students of color who are traditionally underrepresented. Therefore, an assumption of this study was Black women graduate students shared common experiences related discrimination and other "isms" such as racism and sexism (Collins, 2009). Another assumption was Black women graduate students faced multiple challenges within and outside of higher education because of their identities. Considering the prevalence of these issues, the researcher

assumed that Black women graduate students engaged in some form of action to address challenges they faced, including activist efforts for change.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Given the continual oppression of Black women in society, and in educational contexts, Black women have persistently committed to mitigating the adverse effects of racism, sexism, and classism among many other social issues. Collins (2009) noted "because the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power work together to produce particular patterns of domination, Black women's activism demonstrates a comparable complexity" (p. 218). Therefore, examining the activism experiences of Black women graduate students contributed a unique, nuanced perspective concerning graduate student activism in higher education. This research further illuminated the problematic struggle for equality Black women pursuing graduate degrees engaged in as they navigated their predominately White academic institutions and their communities. Thus, the findings from this study generated practical knowledge that may assist administrators and faculty in cultivating environments that are supportive of Black women and their activism.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER ONE

This chapter gave the overarching context for the study regarding the experiences of Black women graduate students in higher education, and the student activism that has taken place on college campuses. The problem statement for this study was then provided, followed by the purpose of the study, and the research questions guiding the study. An overview of the qualitative methodology was included to establish data collection protocols and procedures. Definitions of terms related to this study

provided clarification, the delimitations, as well as limitations, were given to address the boundaries and scope of the research, with the significance stated after that. Chapter two expands upon the contextual background discussed in this introductory section, to establish a comprehensive, yet critical assessment of the research and scholarship related to the topic of study.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

This chapter provides an assessment of the research concerning the experiences of Black women graduate students and student activism in higher education to illuminate the void in the literature specifically regarding the activism experiences of Black women graduate students. Specifically, the following topics are discussed: Black women's discrimination experiences, student activism in higher education, and the activism of Black women in education, and an explanation of the need for a study on the activism of Black women graduate students. A synopsis of the theoretical framework for the study is given with an explanation of how it was used in the research process.

BLACK WOMEN'S DISCRIMINATION EXPERIENCES

Historically, Black women in America have overcome several challenges during their struggle to advance the Black community and make space for themselves in a world that has traditionally ignored them (Hall et al., 2007). However, due to the intersection of race and gender, Black women in our society still confront a unique intersectional subordination that occurs as "the consequence of the imposition of one burden interacting with pre-existing vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment" (Crenshaw, 1985, p. 359). Their subjection to systematic oppression across generations has resulted in their limited access to, and participation in mainstream institutions (e.g., housing, healthcare, discrimination, education, industry) and has relegated them to margins of society (Collins, 2009). Black women's disenfranchisement has resulted in lower earnings in comparison to White males (Hegewisch & Williams-Baron, 2016), the segregation of Black women into high poverty neighborhoods (Vaidyanathan, 2016), and

discrepancies between Black women and other groups in issues related to health and wellness (Barnes, 2017). Oppression at the societal level has also impacted their daily experiences concerning gendered racism.

Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight (2008) explored the effects of gendered racism, the discrimination felt by Black women because of dominant perceptions and stereotypes, on their psychological distress. Their findings revealed gendered racism occurred most within interpersonal interactions with others such as service professionals, sales clerks, wait staff at restaurants or total strangers (Thomas et al., 2008). The work setting was also a site of gendered racism, and negatively influenced the interactions between Black women, their coworkers, employers, and supervisors (Thomas et al., 2008). Black women reported being disrespected, called names, and also harassment. The gendered racism towards these women was positively related to their psychological distress, meaning their unfavorable treatment led to feelings and emotions that impacted their way of life (Thomas et al., 2008). In predominately White living communities, Black middle-class women specifically have felt social isolation not only because of their race and gender but because of their inability to connect with others, including those in the Black community, because of differences in education levels or class (Terhune, 2008). Subtle reminders of racism have been persistent in their daily experiences and rejection common (Terhune, 2008). In response to their marginalization, Black women have in turn formed their own communities of support and incorporated positive messages about their culture into their psyche to combat negative stereotypes (Terhune, 2008). Black women have also engaged in work to dismantle larger systems that perpetuate discrimination against them in social institutions (Collins, 2009).

Black women's efforts for social change have come in the form of community organizing, redefining images of Black women by resisting dominant tropes concerning

their sexuality and inferiority, and directly challenging institutional policies, laws, and practices (Collins, 2009). Specific ways they have affected change include participation in women's club movements, intellectual writings on the oppression of Blacks in society, and significant contributions to Black liberation movements (e.g., Civil Rights and Black Power movement) (Hall et al., 2007). The transformation of society today is in part indebted to the legacy of Black women (Hall et al., 2007). Black women are nonetheless subjected to subordination within mainstream institutions, in spite of their work to alleviate the ramifications of the oppressive conditions in which they exist. Discrimination, for example, is still experienced by Black women, specifically graduate students, in higher education.

Black Women Graduate Students' Discrimination Experiences in Higher Education

As mentioned previously, the enrollment and number of degree recipients among Black women in college have increased since the 1970s (Garibaldi, 2014). A rise in the participation of women in higher education overall has led to a significant widening of the gender gap between women and men across all racial groups. Garibaldi asserted such disparities gained more recognition recently primarily because of the noticeable differences between the college enrollment of White women and men. However, Garibaldi argued, variations in the enrollment of Black women and men have not been uncommon. There has been a historical trajectory where men have traditionally obtained jobs or entered the military, while women attended college; this remains true even after acknowledging the historical inaccessibility of universities to Black students before the Brown decision.

Despite their growing numbers on campus, Black women graduate students in higher education are yet viewed in many respects as the token Black female and remain

one of few students of color in predominately White spaces (Robinson, 2013). Black women graduate students face a myriad of challenges related to racism and discrimination within higher education (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Furthermore, institutional bias has affected the academic experiences of Black women in undergraduate, graduate, and professional school programs collectively. The misguided perceptions of Black women graduate students have additionally influenced their interactions and socialization within the graduate setting.

Race and gender have proven to be a significant determinant of the treatment these women receive from faculty, staff, and their peers (Alexander & Hermann, 2015; Schwartz et al., 2003; Shavers & Moore, 2014). These women have often experienced racial microaggressions, racial stereotyping, and feelings of invisibility in a multitude of contexts, including different institutional types, fields, programs, and departments (Alexander & Hermann, 2015; Borum & Walker, 2012; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Shavers & Moore, 2014). The graduate school socialization process is particularly difficult for Black women, as their orientation to the graduate environment has included instances of isolation and alienation (Ellis, 2001). Ellis (2001) investigated the socialization of graduate students, specifically focusing on the experiences of Black and White students at a Predominately White Institution (PWI). Concerning relationships with their advisors, White males reported less dissatisfaction with their academic advisers or mentors than did White females, Black males, and Black females (Ellis, 2001). Ellis (2001) highlighted, however, that Black women reported adviser relationships that were more confrontational than their peers and reported less engagement with faculty regarding their work.

Black male participants reported the highest levels of satisfaction within their programs of all the students, which was a significant finding (Ellis, 2001). The men

expressed that their main priority was to complete their degrees quickly to advance to the next level in their careers; they were not necessarily concerned with making intimate connections (Ellis, 2001). Both Black men and women, however, felt isolated in their programs. Although Black men did not report social integration as a priority for Black men, they were nonetheless able to integrate into the social and academic community with more ease than Black women (Ellis, 2001).

Conversely, Black women in this study reported the lowest levels of satisfaction with their doctoral studies because of problematic departmental and classroom environments (Ellis, 2001). Black women also felt less of a connection to their doctoral programs, expressing a lack of community. Their efforts to form relationships with other Black males, and White women alike, did not garner the results the Black women desired. As one Black woman stated, "You feel brought back home to realize that you are, in fact, a Black woman there, standing alone" (Ellis, 2001, p. 38). Ellis's findings suggest that although Black men and women may encounter similar challenges in graduate educational settings, the experiences of Black women are still distinct from even their Black male peers.

Black women graduate students at predominately White institutions (PWIs) in particular reported similarly feeling isolated on campus because their environments were less personal and hospitable (Borum & Walker, 2012; Joseph, 2012). An absence of faculty support and mentorship, coupled with lowered expectations because of their race and gender, fostered an overall negative experience among Black women graduate students (Borum & Walker, 2012; Joseph, 2012). These sentiments were especially true for those in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) (Alexander & Hermann, 2015; Borum & Walker, 2012; Joseph, 2012). Black women in

STEM programs have also felt less confident in their abilities because of constant belittling by faculty and their peers (Alexander & Hermann, 2015).

Joseph (2012) examined the transition of African-American women from a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) to a majority White institution during the first two years of graduate school in the STEM fields. The study focused on the implications of this transition on the persistence and success of Black women graduate students within their various disciplines (Joseph, 2012). Findings from the study indicated that HBCUs provided, overall, a more affirming, nurturing, and developmental environment where students felt comfortable and supported in their academic endeavors (Joseph, 2012). The converse, however, was true for Black women graduate students in the PWI setting, which was less welcoming or supportive (Joseph, 2012).

Several studies exploring the experiences of Black women graduate students have identified the multiple barriers they encounter in higher education including challenges to their intellectual ability, racial microaggressions, and a lack of institutional support (Alexander & Hermann, 2015; Borum & Walker, 2012; Ellis, 2001; Joseph, 2012). Also, other research has examined the strategies and interventions Black women graduate students have used to mitigate the negative impact of their disparate treatment on Black women's participation in the graduate school as well as their retention (Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Lewis et al., 2013; Schwartz et al., 2003). For instance, connections to their religious faith served as a source of support, which fostered Black women's success in graduate education (Patton & Harper, 2003; Schwartz et al., 2003). Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Browne Huntt (2013) identified other specific strategies that Black women graduate students used to cope with gendered racial microaggressions in college. One of the two approaches utilized was resistance coping "which represented active strategies that incorporated both cognitive and behavioral ways to deal with the [microaggressive]

situation" (Lewis et al., 2013, p. 61). Collective coping, which entailed depending on social networks of support and group activities, was also employed (Lewis et al., 2013).

For example, Black women graduate students have created professional and personal networks amongst themselves which have provided guidance and encouragement in the absence of more formal mentoring relations (Patton & Harper, 2003). Black women have also sought support and advice from others within and outside of academia. Networks of mentors including mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and friends have been critical to the success of Black women graduate students (Patton, 2009; Patton & Harper, 2003). These individuals provided life lessons on humility, independence, the value of education, how to deal with White people, and how to cultivate personal self-worth (Patton, 2009). According to Reddick and Young (2012), graduate students of color, including Black women have also significantly benefited from mentors within academia.

Mentors have helped students of color navigate the realities of the campus environment regarding campus climate and can also provide guidance on the "hidden curriculum" or unspoken rules and expectations within the graduate community (Reddick & Young, 2012). Graduate students of color additionally have more access to networks and resources through mentors who support them personally and professionally. Because of the lack of Black faculty at universities, Black women graduate students are often not able to connect with mentors who share their same race or gender. Reddick and Young acknowledged the importance of race-conscious mentoring practices in these circumstances, which requires mentors to intentionally work to understand the impact of race on the lives of their students.

Davidson and Foster-Johnson (2001), in their discussion on the cross-race mentoring of graduate students, similarly asserted “what is most critical is to understand

what happens in successful same-race mentor-protégé relationships and try to generalize the best of those dynamics in all mentoring relationships" (p. 553). For Black women graduate students, same-sex same-race relationships, in conjunction with successful cross-race and cross-gender mentoring, have proven to be an effective strategy in bolstering their professional and academic progress (Grant & Simmons, 2008). Dolan's (2007) study on cross-race mentoring similarly revealed mentors from various racial and gendered backgrounds have formed meaningful relationships with Black women graduate students (Dolan, 2007). Karen Butler-Purry, a Black woman, and current associate provost for graduate and professional studies at Texas A&M University had positive experiences with mentors from varying backgrounds in graduate school (Dolan, 2007). She expressed,

> They all helped me from different perspectives…. The white male is mentoring research in my field and is really good at identifying research sources, funding, topics, things like that. The women, not in my research area, have helped from a broader career perspective with things like career opportunities and perspectives, as well as teaching. (Dolan, 2007, p. 27)

Butler-Purry believed that having mentors with diverse experiences provided different perspectives (Dolan, 2007). To reiterate, faculty serving in mentoring positions often expose graduate students of color to experiences that expand their professional network and skills. However, the small number of students of color in graduate education, including Black women, has led to what Gay has termed, a "problematic popularity" among faculty (Gay, 2004, p. 284).

According to Gay (2004), the opportunities faculty provide, may not on their face be viewed as isolating or marginalizing experiences for Black women. Serving on committees or in other service roles to represent the viewpoints of diverse students may

seem like valuable experiences (Gay, 2004). Gay noted, "frequently, those extending the invitations are simply using the students for their own purposes, rather than genuine opportunities for them to enhance their professional development" (p. 284). Refusing such invitations might additionally result in unspoken consequences for the student (Gay, 2004). Furthermore, this form of cultural taxation, due to the tokenization of Black women in the academy, has dramatically impacted their work in other areas such as research, as they are often held to higher expectations and tend to contribute more service to their universities (Hinton, 2010). Black women graduate students have, nonetheless, still viewed their overall experiences in graduate school as beneficial regardless of the difficulties they encountered (Schwartz et al., 2003). And although Black women graduate students have confronted pervasive adverse conditions that are seemingly unending, they, along with their peers, have nevertheless continually worked to transform the higher education environment through their activism.

STUDENT ACTIVISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Activism, or organizing among students in higher education to address social inequality, has long been a part of the campus fabric of colleges and universities (Rhoads, 2016). Social unrest during the 1950's and 1960s brought about an era of social movements (e.g., Black Power Movement, Chicano/a Movement, Civil Rights Movement, etc.) and student struggles on campuses across the nation (Flowers, 2005; Joseph, 2003; Rhoads, 2016). Although post-secondary students from all backgrounds participated in these efforts for change, students of color had a particular vested interest in attaining their civil and human rights in a society that possessed a deep racial hatred towards them. The activism of students at Historically Black Colleges and University (HBCUs), which predated the segregation efforts of public institutions, provided a

foundational platform for Black students' participation in critical movements during the 1950s and 1960s (Commodore & Palmer, 2017). Commodore and Palmer (2017) noted, "in essence, without HBCUs much of the Civil Rights Movement would not only not have existed but, lacking HBCUs to serve as incubators of thought, meeting spaces, and protest training facilities, may have been stagnant in growth" (p. 294). Black student leaders, both men, and women have played a pivotal role in leading efforts against the discrimination and inequality they faced. Male figures (i.e., John Lewis, and Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair, Jr. and David Richmond of the Greensboro sit-ins) have been prominently displayed as leaders of civil rights struggles (Flowers, 2005). Mainstream historical accounts of social movements have failed to include the voices and deeds of Black women until their recent emergence in Black studies literature (Barnett, 1993; Collins, 2009; Williams, 2008).

For instance, Black women attending Bennett College also played an integral role in strategizing and planning the 1960 sit-in movements at the Woolworth, and S.H. Kress stores in Greensboro, North Carolina (Flowers, 2005). Disagreeing with the slow pace of desegregation, after the Brown v. Board of Education (1954) decision, they worked to sustain the sit-in movement for nearly six months before the eventual integration of the lunch counters (Flowers, 2005). However, the literature does not traditionally include their stories concerning the Civil Rights Movement (Flowers, 2005). The exclusion of Black women in leadership roles during the civil and human rights movements has been attributed to the presence of male patriarchy within the Black community (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1981). Black women's activism, according to Collins (2009) has also been widely ignored because of limited definitions of activism, which center on the participation of individuals in institutions and political processes that historically excluded Black women. Despite their lack of acknowledgment, Black women have been

involved in activist efforts from the days of slavery till present (Collins, 2009). Other races/ethnicities have also committed themselves to struggles for equity at post-secondary institutions.

The Chicano/a Movement surfaced on campus during the 1960s as college students began to protest the racism they faced from teachers and administrators within their educational institutions (Rhoads, 2016). The Black and Chicano/a movements influenced other subpopulations such as women to engage in their own activism. As these women students began to recognize their marginality within broader social movements, their advocacy for their individual needs grew more prominent (Rhoads, 2016). The Women's Rights Movement was formed with the intent of gaining equal rights for women in areas including the political process, as well as employment ("Betty Friedan," 2009). The prominent activist Betty Friedan's The Feminist Mystique (1963) was a foundational work used during the establishment of the movement ("Betty Friedan," 2009). However, Black women scholars in the academy during this time began to critique the broader women's movements. They took issue with the exclusion of Black women from the political agendas created by middle-class White women who had not yet confronted the realities of their own discriminatory experiences (Collins, 2009, Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1981). bell hooks (1981), educator and social activist surmised,

> If the white women who organized the contemporary movement toward feminism were at all remotely aware of the racial politics in American history, they would have known that overcoming barriers that separate women from one another would entail confronting the reality of racism, and not just racism as a general evil in society but the race hatred they might harbor in their own psyches. (p. 122)

To summarize, White women during the feminist revolution failed to be accountable to their own racist ideologies and their complicity in the oppression of women of color.

The Combahee River Collective (CRC), a Black feminist group formed in 1973, similarly worked against the simultaneous raced and gendered oppression of Black women, and particularly highlighted the need for acknowledging the role of lesbians within the Black feminist movement (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). In “A Black Feminist Statement,” the CRC expressed, “We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression” (as cited in Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 234). This statement served as a clear articulation of how Black women brought themselves from the margins of the feminist movement to the center through their participation in endeavors for institutional transformation. As Jacoby (2017) suggested, "given that colleges are microcosms of society, the issues they address within the scope of the campus are indeed deeply embedded in one of society's most important and influential activities" (p. 2). In other words, activism in post-secondary education is often a reflection of the issues present in broader society.

Today in the age of the Trump presidency, students are participating in "new student activism," meaning they have taken on different approaches to fighting inequity in comparison to the activities of their predecessors (Jacoby, 2017, p.1). Through the use of several mediums such as social media and technology (Linder et al., 2016), and student-driven initiatives on college campuses, (Kimball et al., 2016; Willison, 2016) students continue to struggle for positive institutional transformation. Recent research on student activism in higher education has illuminated the necessity and impact student movements have on changing campus culture, and the need for institutional support of these movements (Jacoby, 2012; Rhoads, 2016). Students have, regardless of formal backing from administrations, begun to make space for themselves and address the contemporary issues they confront on a daily basis.

Kimball, Moore, Vaccaro, Troiano, & Newman (2016) conducted a constructivist grounded theory study of 59 college students and recent graduates with disabilities to explore the relationship between their activism and their life's purpose. Their research indicated the activism of students with disabilities encompassed a variety of behaviors including the self-advocacy they learned at an early age, the activist endeavors they were involved in at the collegiate level, and the realization that they were more than just students with disabilities. The parents of the students in the study socialized them from a young age to embrace their disability as part of their identity, as well as to advocate for their needs in the educational environment. These were skills the students then applied to their college activism, in which they later became role models and taught others to advocate for themselves. Students in Kimball et al.'s study further engaged in awareness campaigns to lessen the negative stigma associated with having a disability. Additionally, the students formed clubs and or joined organizations for collective action to bring about change. A significant finding from the researchers study, however, was that the students' activism was not limited to just their disability but was also motivated by their other social identities including their personal life experiences, and a willingness to serve others. The desire to address their particular needs and to change institutional culture also occurred through the activism of graduate students.

Lantz et al. (2016), discussed how a collective of eight psychology doctoral students came together to respond to the silence within their institutions related to overt racist events and violent deaths that had occurred nationally. Graduate Students Talk, the grassroots initiative developed by the graduate students, consisted of the facilitation of several teleconference calls, in-person discussions, and a national conference, each of which created a space where they, and others could address their feelings and emotions regarding the highly sociopolitical climate. Lantz et al. further noted how the group of

graduate students additionally organized a national campaign called, "First Do No Harm," as a reaction to a national psychology report concerning psychologist's participation in the torture of terrorism suspects. From their experiences as organizers, the students reported four benefits of being part of the collective: validation of their experiences from others, an instilment of hope, the motivation to act or advocate for other issues, and access to a safe space to process their thoughts (Lantz et al., 2016). While these studies show the general landscape of activism among students in higher education, they do not explicitly provide perspectives on the contemporary activism of students of color, who have made a considerable impact on campus climates.

Contemporary Activism of Undergraduate Students of Color in Higher Education

As noted previously, students of color in higher education have been critical participants within social movements past and present (e.g., Civil Rights, Black Power, Black Lives Matter) (Flowers, 2005; Joseph, 2003; Nguyen, 2016). Their political activism has been a response to institutional discrimination coupled with the burden of their daily challenges in society. For instance, the presence of Black studies programs at institutions across the nation has been attributed to the demands of Black students, during the 1960s Black Power Movement, for an education that encompassed their history and was relevant to their experiences (Joseph, 2003). American universities were sites of unrest where the politics of social protest were profoundly influenced by the broader social climate (Joseph, 2003). Today, colleges are still sources of socio-political activity, where students react and respond to the unjust events in their communities and the nation.

To illustrate, in 2014, students at Harvard University started the photo social media campaign “I, Too, Am Harvard,” which sought to give voice to the Black students on campus:

> Our voices often go unheard on this campus, our experiences are devalued, our presence is questioned-- this project is our way of speaking back, of claiming this campus, of standing up to say: We are here. This place is ours. We, TOO, are Harvard. (“I, Too, Am Harvard,” 2014, para. 1)

The year of 2015 brought more student unrest as students at the University of Missouri grew discontent with the unresponsiveness of then Missouri University System President Tim Wolfe (Pearson, 2015).

After the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri, racial issues and tensions heightened on campuses across the nation. Student Government President, Payton Head, a Black male student at the University of Missouri took to Facebook to express his grievances with the bigotry he faced on campus (Pearson, 2015). Students who agreed with Head's sentiments took efforts into their own hands and also protested, expressing that nothing had been done to address their concerns by the administration. According to Pearson, the student group, "Concerned Student 1950", issued a list of demands, including the removal of President Wolfe. Pearson further noted, graduate student, Jonathan Butler launched a hunger strike, which spurred an accompanying boycott by students who were sympathetic to Butler's cause. The football team at Missouri later announced their refusal to play until the administration removed Wolfe, after which Wolfe resigned. Other campuses across the nation soon joined in support of the Mizzou students with their own activist movements.

Undergraduate and graduate students at Brown University staged a “blackout,” where they wore Black in honor of those who faced racial discrimination across the nation (Sloan, 2016; Wong & Greene, 2016). Black graduate students of Brown took action by leading a social justice teach-in, and also developed a list of demands written by 35 graduate students. This list included demands for an increase in the number of

faculty of color and the development of a more inclusive campus for students of color (Sloan, 2016). Seventy Black students at the University of Texas at Austin participated in a die-in, in front of the University Tower to protest their concerns regarding the massive killings of Black men and women, and the challenges facing Black students on campuses nationwide (Nguyen, 2016). The affirmative action case of Fisher v. University of Texas (2016) sparked controversy when Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia suggested Black students would be better off at "slower track" schools (Visser, 2015). Black graduates from UT Austin took to Twitter and protested the scathing remarks using the hashtag #StayMadAbby to demonstrate pride in their successful attainment of a degree from the institution (Visser, 2015).

The Women's March on Washington also attracted the support of students of color from post-secondary institutions across the country. Students from universities such as Howard University expressed their support of the event, in spite of the lack of Black faces during the march due to personal opinions regarding inclusivity within the movement (Felton, 2017). Women from Binghamton University similarly found the march worthwhile with one student asserting,

> This was a great moment for me to affirm everything that I already believe in, but now work on getting my beliefs to impact my country. I am going to demand that this new administration takes action in supporting women, black people, [transgender] rights, non- binary persons, climate change, people of color, immigrants, refugees, native persons and any intersections of these groups and more. (Mackof, 2017, para. 10)

Overall, students felt that the march proved to be just the beginning of activist efforts needed for further change (Mackof, 2017).

The circumstances sparking student resistance have varied, dependent upon the context and the historical challenges presented during times of social unrest. However, several scholars have sought to determine the motivations behind the contemporary activism of students of color in higher education (Hope et al., 2016; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015; Willison, 2016). For example, Szymanski and Lewis' (2015) study examined

> Three forms of race-related stress (i.e., cultural, institutional, and individual) and six racial identity dimensions [of the Expanded Nigrescence Theory model] (i.e., Pre-Encounter Assimilation, Miseducation, and Self-Hatred, Immersion-Emersion Anti-White, and Internalization Afrocentricity and Multiculturalist Inclusive) as predictors of involvement in activism in a sample of 185 African American undergraduate women and men. (p. 170)

From the study, they identified culturally related stress, or stress associated with experiences of racism related to the denigration of their culture, as a significant predictor of activism among Black students (Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). The racial identity dimensions of Immersion-Emersion Anti White, Internalization Afrocentricity and Internalization Multiculturalist Inclusive were also predictive of Black students' activism (Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). In other words, as students developed a more positive self-identity and an increased awareness of racism among other minority groups, there was a higher likelihood of social change engagement (Szymanski & Lewis, 2015).

Similarly, Hope, Keels, and Durkee (2016) explored the modern activism of Black and Latino freshmen students through their participation in the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) and their advocacy for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). However, they explicitly examined connections between the students' participation in BLM and DACA, and their "broader political activism, experiences with racial/ethnic microagressions, and political efficacy" (p. 206). The findings of their study

revealed that the prior political involvement of students in social movements, their personal history, and psychosocial factors such as racial microaggressions were good predictors of student activism. More specifically, higher student participation in either the BLM or DACA was associated with higher participation for both Latinos and Blacks. Students' exposure to higher levels of microaggressions in the high school context, as well as their past participation in activism, was also associated with higher levels of political activism among both groups.

Institutional support from faculty, staff, and administrators also influenced student activism among students of color on college campuses (Willison, 2016). When universities prioritize diversity as a goal to support the institutional success of students, the dynamics of collaborations between students and employees can be altered to garner meaningful, sustainable partnerships (Willison, 2016). According to Willison (2016), this "relational activism" aids in the creation of long-term relationships among individuals who are working for social change (p. 3). These relationships have mitigated the hierarchy of power between employees and students and increased employee levels of support outside of their traditional mentoring roles (Willison, 2016).

From their experiences related to activism, students of color begin to recognize the agency within them, and the impact of the meaningful change they create within their institutions and communities (DeAngelo et al., 2016; Willison, 2016). The benefits of students of color's participation in activist efforts on campus have also been many, including reports of more confidence in their abilities to be leaders (Willison, 2016) and an empowered identity to fight against oppressive conditions (DeAngelo et al., 2016). DeAngelo, Schuster, and Stebleton (2016) conducted a constructivist grounded theory study of 16 students of color, DREAMers (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors), to provide insight into how their activism impacted their identity development.

The process of students "coming to activism," or becoming more engaged in activist work, brought about both internal changes within the students and external modifications as they engaged with their communities (DeAngelo et al., 2016).

The self-confidence they gained was fuel for their empowerment, which then led to them making space for themselves in a hostile setting that often suppressed their experiences (DeAngelo et al., 2016). Because of their new empowered identity, the students used their power to rewrite the negative narratives used against them, replacing the unfavorable stereotypes with their own positive definitions of themselves (DeAngelo, 2016). While some student groups were deeply connected to activist efforts on campus because of their experiences with societal injustice, other subpopulations have had differing perceptions regarding their role in activism within the college setting.

Agyemang, Singer, and DeLorme (2010) conducted a study focused on understanding Black male college athletes' perspectives on race and activism within the American society and sport. The students reported sentiments that race was still a common factor in their experiences. Regarding the topic of activism, the athletes demonstrated a familiarity with the activism of their athletic predecessors, particularly basketball and football, where because of higher representation, former Black athletes experienced greater discrimination. Although current Black college athletes understood the importance of past Black athletes' struggles and sacrifices, they felt disengaged from activism, citing less involvement because of more competition in the sports arena, and also a hesitancy to criticize existing conditions for fear of repercussions. In spite of the disconnect, the Black athletes voiced their continued responsibility to engage in activities that positively affect others, and to speak out against injustice. Agyemang et al.'s study explicitly focused on the perceptions of activism among Black college men. However,

women of color, in the graduate school setting, have remained critically conscious of, and active in the struggle against racism and sexism in higher education.

Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari (2017) used their critical collaborative autoethnographic writing as a "form of critical activism that challenge[d] and destabilize[d] racist and patriarchal educational practices" (p. 91). These women reported gravitating towards each other for survival in a space that was unwelcoming to people of color and dominated by patriarchal ideologies. After a collective reflection on their experiences in graduate school, the three women of color discovered there were commonalities among how they came into their "wokeness" or their "critical consciousness to intersecting systems of oppression" (Ashlee et al., 2017, p. 90). Ashlee, a self-identified transracial Asian American "womxn" of color expressed how a brutal attack on Twitter, because of her outspokenness, made her feel unsafe on campus. For her, the fact that she had to deal with disparate treatment that her White male peers would never face was additionally troubling. Zamora, a self-identified Latina, reflected on her experiences in the classroom setting during conversations on race. For her, the tears of White women due to their discomfort with their own personal racism were disconcerting, as she had lived with such tensions every day. Karikari, a self-identified African American "womxn" discussed how empowered she felt after finally being exposed to a course where she was in the racial majority, and the curriculum reflected the concerns of people of color. This experience led her to believe that she could be an entirely authentic Black woman in the academy. Karikari's experiences in particular mirrored other research about Black women who have expressed their concerns over the omission of Black women's voices in graduate coursework and literature.

These women of color also, from their reflections, recognized the benefits and consequences of wokeness, and the necessity of having a community that encouraged

their continued wokeness in higher education (Ashlee et al., 2017). A significant finding centered on the importance of community as a tool of resistance among the women:

> When we acquiesce to the isolation inflicted upon us, we risk our wokeness, our sanity, and our survival. Instead, we must resist by coming together. Collectively, our presence changes the academy; it is when we are in community that we discover our shared strength. When in community, we create knowledge that would not otherwise be possible. (p. 100)

Although the women were able to collectively find common themes of how they came to a critical consciousness across their personal narratives, the individual stories of each woman demonstrated the nuanced experiences they had as well as differences in their perspectives regarding their place in the academy. The universal challenges the women encountered however led to an intentional, concerted effort to build community with each other, and they chose to use their voices as a form of activism to awake the critical consciousness of others.

The efforts of the graduate women of color engaged in represented a significant act of resistance (Ashlee et al., 2017). Their activism illustrated the complex nature of women of colors' efforts for change that, as scholars such as Collins (2009) suggested, have been unacknowledged in many spaces. The findings from Ashlee et al.'s (2017) study present significant implications for the higher education community. Their reflections revealed that there is a necessity in examining the activist participation of women of color graduate students in the academy, as they present a unique perspective. An assessment of the research concerning Black women faculty and graduate students specifically, at the K-12 and postsecondary levels suggest similar findings.

ACTIVISM OF BLACK WOMEN IN EDUCATION

Black women at all educational levels have, throughout history, chosen to negotiate the divides between people because of identity differences, by serving as, what Horsford (2012) termed "bridge leaders." The concept of bridge leadership "describe[s] how the intersection of race and gender as experienced by the Black woman leader has resulted in her serving as a bridge for others, to others, and between others in oppressive and discriminatory contexts over time" (Horsford, 2012, p. 17). According to Horsford (2012), this type of leadership in their activism allowed Black women to traverse differences within race, gender, and class through restructuring traditional hierarchical configurations of leadership, particularly in education. One example of the bridge leadership of Black women has been their participation in past social movements that have positively influenced the contemporary K-16 educational context for Black students in general, and Black women especially.

An investment in the education of the Black community has been a prominent component of Black women's activism and their struggle for group survival (Collins, 2009). From the 1930s to the 1950s, Black women such as Lucile Spence, Gertrude Ayer, and Layle Lane, used their work, as P-12 educators, as a platform to advance larger movements for racial and economic justice in their Harlem community (Johnson, 2004). These educators participated in several school reform efforts aimed at increasing student achievement and changing the curriculums of their schools to reflect the history of Blacks (Johnson, 2004). Pioneer activists in the field of education, such as Lucy Craft Laney, founded educational institutions for their race and assumed leadership positions during tumultuous times of deep hatred and content towards Blacks in America such as the Reconstruction Era (McCluskey, 2014).

Laney founded Haines Institute in Augusta, Georgia, in 1886, with the intent of disproving the assumption that Black women were inadequate and therefore could not adequately teach Black children (McCluskey, 2014). She advocated for Black women to become teachers to "take up the 'burden' of uplifting the race" (McCluskey, 2014, p. 39). Because of Laney's wisdom and influence, she became a mentor and role model to several other Black women such Mary McLeod Bethune, who carried on her legacy through the founding of their own schools and colleges (McCluskey, 2014). Bethune would become another significant educator, founder, and president of an accredited grammar school which later became Bethune-Cookman University, a school dedicated to "vocationalism and liberalism in black education" (McCluskey, 2014, p. 61). The work of Black women continued as educators like Septima Clark, who disagreed with the belief that women should remain in the background of the Civil Rights Movement, created spaces for themselves to educate the masses and bring liberation to their people (Atwater, 2009).

Other Black women educators who came of age, or participated in movements during the 1950's and 1960's, such as the Civil Rights Movements, have continued to incorporate a framework of social change within their current teaching professions (Loder-Jackson, 2012). Some educators have considered their teaching and leadership within the educational setting as essential outlets for their activism. In one study, Loder-Jackson examined how a group of Black women educators, who came of age before, during, and after the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) in Birmingham, Alabama, conceptualized their activism. Loder-Jackson asserted each of these women demonstrated new perspectives or ways of thinking about activism and its presence within the educator role. One of her participants alluded to this when she stated:

> I contend that these educational practices—teaching about democracy, distinguishing between just and unjust laws, refusing to expel students for their participation in CRM protests, and bridging past and present generational realities—are noteworthy activist strategies in their own right. (p. 281)

The complexity of the resistance efforts of these Black women educators who lived through and supported the Civil Rights Movement, bolsters the argument scholars such as Collins (2009) have made regarding the need to rethink Black women's activism. Activism through teaching and leading have also manifested within the field of higher education for Black women faculty.

Activism of Black Women Faculty in Higher Education

Black women in higher education have obtained several roles including those of administrators and faculty at universities nationwide. In their roles as faculty members, teaching, research, and service have been three top priorities that have influenced their career choices and their advancement in the field. The work of the women in these areas have been highly scrutinized, and at times disregarded because of discrimination and the presence of a male-centered dominant culture. Black women faculty have intentionally used these areas of focus as tools of resistance and empowerment (Wallace, Moore, & Curtis, 2014).

Wallace, Moore, and Curtis' (2014) study on the experiences of three Black women faculty who were tenured scholars at PWIs revealed that teaching, service and mentoring were avenues used for fostering social justice and activism. Through an analysis of their autoethnographical narratives, the faculty examined their roles as social change agents in the academy. One faculty member noted: "when [a person is] successful in the pursuit of a transformative or social change research agenda in the academy, it is

possible to positively impact the lives of individuals, families, and communities" (p. 50). Another faculty member explained how she used her teaching as a way to connect academia to the Black community through service by intentionally emphasizing race, ethnicity, women, disabled people, and elderly populations within her coursework. Students were also given the opportunity to interact and work with these populations through hands-on experiences in the community. Creating awareness and exposure to the issues faced by their communities has been a priority for Black women educators since the days of abolition and has remained so.

The work of Black women in the quest for racial progress through the provision of higher education was also considered a way of uplifting their race. This connection to racial uplift was a motto for Black women, accomplished through various forms of community service (Collins, 2009). Black women's tendency to look out for their own, as well as other individuals, placed them in a unique role of "othermothering" (Collins, 2009). This form of activism has proven effective in higher education also, as illustrated by Guiffrida's (2005) extension of Collins' (2009) othermothering concept to Black female faculty and students. Black women faculty have served as role models and mentors, that seek to guide the development of students and others within the Black higher education community (Collins, 2009).

Guiffrida (2005) explicitly examined the characteristics that Black students perceived contributed to the establishment of meaningful relationships between them and faculty members at their institution. Faculty who were considered supportive were those who went above and beyond by being a mentor, advocating for them, providing professional and academic assistance, encouraging them, and setting high expectations of them (Guiffrida, 2005). Through othermothering, Black women faculty in higher education have been able to affect the success of students of color and rewrite dominant

narratives on the capacity of these students through their care within and outside of the classroom (Collins, 2009; Guiffrida, 2005). Guiffrida (2005) and Wallace et al. (2014) have shown the impact Black women faculty in higher education have made within their environments through their activism.

Though the relationships forged because of othermothering have proven valuable, they have not been without consequence (Collins, 2009; Guiffrida, 2005). Assignments to more advisees of color, who seek mentorship from Black women specifically because of their race, is not uncommon (Hinton, 2010). Black women faculty, as a result, have experienced cultural taxation, or situations where they have been called to perform extra service for their institutions due to their race. According to Hinton (2010),

> Not only are service and scholarship not equally valued they are also rewarded differently. Hence, the expectation that minority faculty members should represent the diverse face of the university, through committee work, creates a disadvantage for minority faculty members who are pursuing tenure and promotion. (p. 396)

Despite the implications of Black women's activism through service, their participation in higher education is invaluable. It is important to note, however, that the struggle for change has not been limited to faculty, as Black women graduate students have also invested in similar activism efforts.

Activism of Black Women Graduate Students

Black women graduate students have chosen to use their voices in the educational context, and in larger society to combat the issues they face regarding discrimination. One prominent example of this is the work of Alicia Garza who, while a graduate student in ethnic studies at San Francisco State University, co-founded Black Lives Matter in

2013 in response to pervasive violence against Black people (Kenny, 2017). Garza chose to pursue her master's degree while actively engaging in community organizing. She expressed "[she] really wanted to document the work [she] was doing, and [she] wanted to protect some time to reflect on the work that [she] was doing, hopefully making it better and sharper" (as cited in Kenny, 2017, para. 5).

Garza's work, along with co-founders Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, was instrumental in the development of the Black Lives Matter Movement, which is an "ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression" (Garza, n. d., para. 2). Since the creation of the hashtag, several initiatives have emerged, led by both the original founders, and several other organizations across the country, that have strengthened the contemporary movement for the liberation of Black people. Garza asserted, however, that their foundational work has been continually used and adapted by others (e.g., Blue Lives Matter, Women's Lives Matter, Migrant Lives Matter). There has been a failure to acknowledge the origins of the concept as, "straight men, unintentionally or intentionally, have taken the work of queer Black women and erased [their] contributions" (para. 7). These sentiments are akin to those expressed previously concerning the omission of Black women's activism during past social movements such as the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power Movement. Black women graduate students have, regardless, still transformed higher education institutions through their organizing work.

Antonia Okafor, a current graduate student at the University of Texas at Dallas, provides another example of Black women's activism in higher education. As one of the nation's most prominent advocates of concealed carry on campus, Okafor became the

Southwest Regional Director for Students for Concealed Carry on Campus (SCCC) in 2015 (Okafor, n. d. a). Her work has consisted of a diverse range of activities, including her blog, Be Empowered, and her role as co-founder and president of EmPOWERed, "a movement of women on college campuses all over the country who feel empowered when they use their gun for self-defense" (Okafor, n. d. b, para. 1). Okafor expressed the motivation behind her activism when she stated, "I am involved because I want to know the issues and policies that affect people like me. I want to know those who make those policies and how I can help them make better decisions" (as cited in Blain, 2015, para. 6). The issues that Black women graduate students pursue through their activist endeavors are multiple. The approaches these women use to engage in change efforts on their campuses also vary.

Black women are often one of few students of color in classes on predominately White campuses. They are viewed in many respects as the token Black female (Robinson, 2013). Robinson's study examining how Black women responded to issues of tokenism within the graduate context revealed that the experiences of Black women with White students and professors in the classroom setting had "a profound impact on how they [saw] their role in representing Black female identity" (p. 178). While some students viewed this responsibility as a positive one, others felt the responsibility of representation was a burden. The lack of a critical mass, or substantive presence, of Black women in graduate programs, added an extra layer of tokenism in which the women had to bring "one's race, gender and identity politics" (p. 178) to the educational space. Black women, when navigating the politics of whether to speak out or remain silent about the oppression they faced in the academy, chose to use their voice to talk back and resist their disparate treatment, even at the risk of being further marginalized, silenced, ignored, or misjudged. Robinson's research demonstrated how Black women graduate students engage in

activism, through use of their voice, to create change. However, to the knowledge of the researcher, few other scholars have made assiduous efforts to explore the activism of Black women graduate students.

THE NEED FOR A STUDY ON THE ACTIVISM EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMEN GRADUATE STUDENTS

Research on Black women graduate students presents a sobering perspective on the obstacles these students must overcome in every aspect of their graduate experiences. The recruitment and persistence of these groups is necessary for the cultivation of future faculty and administrators in higher education who will contribute much-needed knowledge and diversity. The manner in which Black women graduate students cope with discrimination, and the support required to prevent attrition, as shown by Johnson-Bailey (2004), Lewis et al. (2013), and Patton (2009) is complex. Although Black women graduate students have played an integral part in transforming their colleges and university, the measures they use to bring about such change are not fully understood. In other words, more research is needed to illuminate how they address challenges through their activism.

Further, several studies exist that have examined the activism of students of color at the undergraduate level (DeAngelo et al., Hope et al., 2016; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015; Willison, 2016). These studies have presented findings concerning the predictors of activism among students of color, as well as institutional cultures that support their efforts, and to show the effects of activism on student's personal identity. Students also exist that have explored the intersection of Black women's activism in education (Horsford, 2012; Loder-Jackson, 2012), and specifically the higher education (Guiffrida, 2005; Wallace et al., 2014). Likewise, Robinson's study demonstrated how Black women

respond to the challenges they face regarding institutional discrimination. The study did not specifically address the activism experiences of Black women graduate students, how they define activism or factors that influence their activism. Given the limitations of the research, the proposed study was needed to contribute new knowledge to a very relevant and contemporary area of research in higher education.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

The application of theoretical frameworks to the activism experiences of Black women graduate students in higher education requires an important consideration of how traditional, longstanding student affairs theories may fail to address issues encountered by this unique population of students (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Differences in the historical plight of Black women graduate students as a result of racial and gender oppressions creates the necessity for selecting theories that speak to the personal, social, and cultural realities in which they live (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009) was used for the purposes this study to aid in analyzing the activism experiences of Black women graduate students in higher education.

Black feminist thought provides a critical perspective to consider when addressing issues of marginality and mattering for Black women students in graduate education. Not only does Black feminist thought center on the specific concerns of Black women, but it is also grounded in their lived experiences (Collins, 2009). Black feminist thought, however, addresses a critical point in its recognition that, "there is no essential or archetypal Black woman whose experiences stand as normal, normative, and thereby authentic" (p. 28). Black women instead have a collective group standpoint, which acknowledges the different ways in which Black women respond to social issues and challenges related to the intersection of their multiple identities. This collectivist

standpoint gives credence to the historical culmination of Black women's experiences with racism and discrimination and validates their interpretation of these lived experiences.

As a theoretical framework, Black feminist thought serves as a powerful tool of critique that can be used to examine how institutions perpetuate systems of inequity which influence the social standings of Black women and issues of marginality in varying contexts (Collins, 2009). The experiences of Black women graduate students in institutions of higher education positions them as "outsiders-within," or individuals that participate within the academy, yet are still considered outsiders because of their social identities which make them invisible. Existing on the margins, therefore, gives these women a unique perspective in higher education. Applying the Black feminist framework to issues of marginality is necessary for not only asking the right questions but also for finding solutions that are culturally relevant and that account for the valid knowledge that Black women graduate students possess regarding their activism. Understanding the complexity of Black women's activism, however, requires an acknowledgment of the various ways in which Black women have engaged in social protest (Collins, 2009). Collins stated the assessment of Black women's activism should focus less on "public, official, visible political activity even though unofficial, private, and seemingly invisible spheres of social life and organization may be equally important" (p. 217). Her conceptualization of Black women's activism consisted of two domains: struggles for group survival and institutional transformation.

Struggles for group survival are described as "actions taken to create Black female spheres of influence within existing social structures" (Collins, 2009, p. 219). The strategies women use as part of their quotidian experience, such as maintaining a positive self-identity or promoting the support and uplift of others through resisting the

perpetuation of dominant stereotypes is just one example of Black women's struggle for group survival. Black women's work within the community represented a form of activism which demonstrated the interdependent nature of Black women's political activism to produce positive Black culture, a key feature of group survival, while simultaneously fostering institutional transformation. Collins expressed, "in this case, Black women's participation in a constellation of mothering activities, collectively called motherwork, often fostered a distinctive political sensibility" (p. 209). Activism within the family unit and the community manifested itself in similar forms, as Black women mothered blood relatives and served in an "othermother role" (p. 210). Through their othermothering in the family and community, these women provided views and counternarratives that differed from dominant discourse surrounding the Black community.

Institutional transformation according to Collins (2009) involves actions taken to challenge and eliminate discrimination in areas such as housing, education, employment and other public institutions. The exclusion of Black women from leadership roles in prominent social movements, as expressed before, resulted in the women developing a myriad of strategies for change wherever the opportunity presented itself (Collins, 2009). As Black women began to understand their oppression as intersectional, they began to establish their own organizations, representative of their own needs, to change the institutions in which they were located (Collins, 2009). Further, a belief in empowering others serves as a specific component of the institutional transformation dimension. Collins' interpretations of Black women's activism will provide a useful guide for the interpretation of findings gathered during this study.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER TWO

An overview of the research regarding the following topics was given to provide a contextual background for the purpose of this study: the discriminatory experiences of Black women graduate students; the activism of students and students of color in higher education; the activism of Black women in education; and the need for a study on the activism experiences of Black women graduate students. Each of the topics discussed provided of foundation for understanding the existing research on Black women graduate students and illustrated that there is a considerable gap in the literature related to their activism experiences. The next chapter of this proposal discusses the methodology that was employed to address the research questions of this study.

Chapter Three – Methodology and Procedures

The experiences of Black women graduate students in higher education have consisted of challenges related to institutional discrimination. As illustrated in the critical review of research, there is a significant void in the literature concerning Black women graduate students and their experiences related to activism. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the activism experiences of Black women graduate students. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. How do Black women graduate students at a public predominately White institution (PWI) define activism?
2. How do Black women graduate students at a public PWI describe their activism experiences and those of their peers?
3. What do Black women graduate students at a public PWI perceive as factors that influence their activism?
4. How does the activism of Black women graduate students at a public PWI influence their student experience?

This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the methodology and procedures used for this investigation. The first section of the chapter explains the epistemological perspective, social constructivism, that informs the qualitative methodology employed in the research. Within this section is a discussion of the strengths and limitations of qualitative research as well as the phenomenological approach used to collect data. A description of the population and sample, data collection protocols, and the procedures for data collection and analysis are then given.

RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

The epistemological foundation of a study concerns how knowledge is constructed in the research process (Hays & Singh, 2014). For qualitative inquiry, "it refers to the degree which knowledge is believed to be constructed by the research process" (Hays & Singh, 2014, p. 35). The design of this study was founded in a social constructivism epistemology or the belief that knowledge is constructed through human interactions with others (Creswell, 2013). The social constructivism framework is one in which no universal truth exists, as individuals make meaning of the world around them that are multiple and varied (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2014). Researchers using this framework, "seek to construct knowledge through social interactions as well as to understand how individuals construct knowledge" (Hays & Singh, 2014, p. 41).

For this study, the researcher assumed that the Black women graduate student participants made meaning of their world through their interactions with others and their environment. These experiences, in turn, influenced their activism experiences. Thus, social constructivism aligned with this study because the subjective, personal beliefs, experiences, and values, of both the researcher and the participants, were embedded in the research and considered valid knowledge (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2014). As an inductive process, social constructivism inquiry generates theories or patterns of meaning from the perspectives of individuals which was the primary aim of the research questions posed (Creswell, 2013). These perspectives were, therefore, obtained using qualitative methods.

A qualitative research approach was utilized for this study because it allowed for the examination of research questions that sought to answer the "how" or "what" facets of a particular phenomenon or experience (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2014). The research questions presented prior asked: how Black women graduate

students defined activism, what were their activism experiences, and what factors influenced their activism. An important attribute, or strength, of qualitative research, is it allows for "the inclusion of many different kinds of data collection and analysis techniques, as well as a diversity of theoretical and epistemological frameworks," (Guest et al., 2013, p. 3). In other words, qualitative research provides flexibility during the data collection process so that the researcher can consider the context of their research environment and adjust their techniques to probe for deeper meanings of the participant experiences (Hays & Singh, 2014). This study had a primary aim of understanding a component of the human experience for Black women graduate students, particularly their activism experiences. The qualitative process is also inductive, meaning the data from participants is used to deeply understand the phenomenon under examination (Hays & Singh, 2014). According to Guest, Namey, and Mitchell (2013), "in collaboration with the participant, the interviewer helps create a narrative that is rich, has depth, and informs the overall study objective" (p. 21). As demonstrated, the qualitative approach presented many strengths, however, there were also limitations.

Properly analyzing the data collected for qualitative research was time-consuming (Guest et al., 2013). The full process required not only the collection of data, but also transcription, coding or an analysis of the data, and the interpretation of the data, which was a significant time commitment (Guest et al., 2013). However, the required number of participants was smaller which made using qualitative methods more manageable. A smaller number of participants in the study created another issue related to the generalizability of the data (Creswell, 2013; Guest et al., 2013; Hays & Singh, 2014). The sample of participants in qualitative studies is too small to be considered representative of a larger population (Guest et al., 2013). Nonetheless, specific qualitative approaches that

incorporate smaller samples, such as phenomenology, help in understanding the essence of an experience for a particular subpopulation (Creswell, 2013).

Phenomenology was the specific qualitative approach used for the collection of data. This approach was used to "discover and describe the meaning or essence of participants' lived experiences, or knowledge as it appears to consciousness" (Hays & Singh, 2014, p. 50). As discussed earlier, the goal of this research was to investigate the meaning Black women graduate students ascribe to the term activism, and to explore their activism experiences to generate a collective understanding or essence of these experiences. The phenomenological approach acknowledged the validity of the participants' experiences and fostered the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participant, related to the phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2014). A new perspective was generated from this process "as if viewing it for the first time, through the eyes of participants who have direct immediate experience with it" (Hays & Singh, 2014, p. 50). The data concerning the activism experiences of Black women graduate students presented a new lens related to the topic of activism for college students.

DESCRIPTION OF POPULATION, SITE, AND SAMPLING

Black women graduate students were the unit of analysis, or population of interest, within this study. Purposive sampling was used to obtain participants. Purposive sampling encompasses choosing participants according to specific study requirements (Guest et al., 2013). Specific criteria for selecting participants was necessary for achieving the end purpose of the study (Guest et al., 2013; Hays & Singh, 2014). Sampling within this study was homogenous, in that the participants shared one or more similarities (Hays & Singh, 2014). Snowball sampling, or recruiting others using the

networks of participants, was also incorporated (Hays & Singh, 2014). Participants selected met all of the following requirements:

1. Self-identified as Black or African American (race/ethnicity requirement)
2. Self-identified as a woman or non-binary (gender requirement)
3. Currently enrolled graduate student (master's, doctoral, or professional) at the University (educational requirement)
4. Self-identified as being engaged in activist efforts or as being sympathetic to activist causes that directly or indirectly challenged institutional and personal oppression. Potential participants did not always personally identify as an activist but had interacted or helped others who were involved in activists causes for social change

Recruitment methods were an essential part of the qualitative research process as they assisted in obtaining the desired population of interest using the preferred sampling strategy (Guest et al., 2013). Recruitment of participants in this study occurred utilizing a variety of methods such as the recruitment emails (see Appendix C) through listservs for graduate student programs, associations, and professional organizations, listservs for students of color, and also emails sent to participant referrals. The recruitment efforts yielded a total of 12 participants which is within the traditional sample size for a qualitative study.

The site for this study was selected based on the Carnegie Classification specifications of a Research 1: Doctoral University, or a university where "20 research/scholarship doctoral degrees during the update year (this does not include professional practice doctoral-level degrees, such as the JD, MD, PharmD, DPT, etc.)" (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n. d., para. 3). The university chosen is a flagship university in the southwest region of the United States.

The University student population contained the following racial/ethnic make-up: White (45.1%), Hispanic (19.5%), Asian (17.2%), Black (3.9%), American Indian (0.2%), Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0.1%), Bi-racial (3.2%), and Unknown (1.1%).

Table 3.1 provides general information on the enrollment for Black graduate students at the chosen site in the fall semester of 2017. Black women graduate students represented approximately two percent of the total graduate student population. The site, therefore, seemed appropriate because the population of Black women graduate students, was very minimal. The small number of Black women in master's, doctoral, and professional programs was reflective of the isolating conditions this population faced at institutions discussed within the review of the literature. Similar large, public universities within the state had a comparable demographic composition.

Table 3.1: Demographic Information for Black Graduate Students at the Flagship University

Graduate Degree	Total # Graduate Students	Total # Black Students	Black Women	Black Men
Master's	5,177	188	115	73
Doctoral	4,339	138	87	51
Special Professional	1,517	90	47	43
Total:	11,033	418	249	167

The University had also been a site of much student activism starting in the 1960s until present day. Student sit-ins at local lunch counters around campus and stand-ins at move theaters near campus were implemented to combat pervasive segregation in the city during the 1950s and 1960s. The activist efforts of students at the University have continued in recent years through various venues. Students have participated in several campus demonstrations as well as social media campaigns to address racial events that

have occurred on the University campus. (Samuels, 2016; Uzman, 2016). The presence of an activist student body, as illustrated, therefore bolstered the appropriateness this University site for research.

DATA COLLECTION PROTOCOLS

For this study, data was collected through the use of three instruments: a demographic questionnaire, two interview protocols (see Appendix A), and a visual elicitation technique. The demographic survey was used to gather general background information on characteristics including but not limited to the participant's program of study, age, and the level of degree they were obtaining. Visual elicitation techniques are essential because they allow the researcher to use different methods to facilitate discussions on a particular subject (Guest et al., 2013). In this study, participants were asked to bring an object of importance that represented their identity as an activist. These objects were then used to garner information about their activism experiences which was analyzed later for thematic content.

Data was collected through the use of a modified version of phenomenological interviewing (Moustakas as cited in Hays & Singh, 2014). This type of interview focuses on obtaining the lived experiences of participants regarding a phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2014), and in this study specifically, the activism of Black women graduate students. Because interviews were the primary tool for data collection, interview protocols (see Appendix A) were created in advance to ensure the same or similar information was obtained from each participant (Patton, 1990). The interview protocol was discussed with expert researchers in the field to elicit feedback regarding the quality of the questions, and their potential for obtaining rich, meaningful data. These protocols consisted of questions related to the participants' background experiences, which were

asked to build rapport with the interviewees and create a conversational dynamic (Patton, 1990). The remaining questions were descriptive and open-ended to encourage the participants to respond with more in-depth information (Patton, 1990). The types of questions used were behavior or experience questions, opinion or value questions, knowledge questions, and probing questions to obtain a comprehensive assortment of data (Hays & Singh, 2014).

A survey to collect general demographic information on the participants, such as age, their program of study, graduate level (master's, doctoral, or professional school), race/ethnicity, gender, and hometown, was also used (see Appendix D). The survey was created using Qualtrics, or a UT Austin approved survey system that is password protected. The questionnaire contained a total of 17 questions, with 16 being open-ended and one multiple choice. The participants were asked to complete the survey voluntarily once they agreed to take part in the study. Emails were sent with an anonymous link through which the survey could be accessed by participants. The estimated time to finish the survey was 10 minutes.

Visualization techniques were also used to gather data for the study. Participants were requested to bring an artifact that represented their identities as activists (Guest et al., 2013). The artifact chosen could be anything, whether that was a physical object, a video, etc. The artifact was used in the study to collect a broader set of data concerning the research questions. Having the participants to discuss the importance of their artifacts was a useful approach because it assisted the researcher in gaining different perspectives on the subject. The conversations elicited from the objects also helped the researcher confirm preliminary interpretations of the data.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

In qualitative research, the thoughts and feelings of the researcher are part of the research process; therefore, researcher reflexivity is necessary (Hays & Singh, 2014). Researcher reflexivity "is defined as the active self-reflection of an investigator on the research process" (Hays & Singh, 2014, p. 137). As a Black woman graduate student at a predominately White institution, I am very familiar with the type of environment where the proposed participants for this study are enrolled. My personal experiences influenced the design, implementation, and analysis of data for this study. My interest in this topic arose while I completed a Black studies methods course for my graduate program. Initially, I planned to examine the experiences of Black men in higher education. However, after completing a Black studies methods course, I began to contemplate research that could address the experiences of women like me in a meaningful way. Black women had contributed so much to the field of higher education by way of their work to better these institutions. No research existed that highlighted the labor they perform behind the scenes to accomplish their goals. I wanted to engage in a study that both exposed and celebrated the activism of this population that is often rendered invisible.

Black women graduate students are a small percentage of the campus demographic population in higher education, which increased the likelihood that I had either a direct or close association with the participants in this study. Because of this, reflecting was necessary throughout the process because of my personal reactions to stories that arose during interviews, which were similar to my experiences in college. These introspective moments involved journaling my thoughts during each phase of the dissertation and having candid conversations with student affairs mentors to help interrogate my assumptions, observations, and interpretations of the information I

acquired. I was able to continually document my feelings, thoughts, and biases, during my negotiation of the research process, which I believe helped my growth as a researcher.

All the introspection that happened during the interviews with the participants prompted me to examine my own thoughts and beliefs about what activism meant to me as a Black woman in graduate school. The stories of the participants were breathtaking, amazing, and inspiring. The narratives of the participants impacted how I viewed myself and provided validation to my work. In return, I made an even more concerted to effort to make them proud because they were a part of me, and I was a part of them also. We were not alone but we had each other, even in the spaces that made us feel isolated and unrecognized. The most important outcome of this research was showing that in spite of everything, we were STILL HERE. And we will continue to flourish and create our own paths to greatness one activist effort at a time.

DATA COLLECTION AND PROCEDURES

After completing the Institutional Review Board process at UT Austin, the Office of Research Support and Compliance approved the research investigation in early October. Recruitment of participants and data collection commenced following IRB approval and lasted from early to mid-October. Once participants were recruited, selected, and had given their consent for participation in the study, the demographic survey questionnaire (see Appendix D) was sent and interviewed began. The demographic survey questionnaire was distributed using the UT Austin Qualtrics platform, which is a survey system that allows for the creation and distribution of online surveys. The survey contained the following open-ended categories: race/ethnicity, nationality, age, hometown, college, department, program of study, full-time/part-time

student, and master's or doctoral student, political affiliation, first-generation status, parent occupation, household income, and parental household income.

For interviewing purposes, a modified phenomenological approach was used (Hays & Singh, 2014). Typically, this interview process involves three phases: phase one interviews to gather information of the participant's lifetime engagement with the phenomenon; phase two interviews focused on gathering specific details of participants' experiences with the phenomenon; and phase three interviews to promote reflection on the meaning of participants experiences (Hays & Singh, 2014). For this study, two interviews were conducted with each participant. One was used to gather background information on the participants, their life experiences, how they defined the concept of activism, and their activism experiences. The second interview phase focused specifically on the positive and negative factors that influence their activism and included a discussion of the artifact they chose to represent their activism. Follow-up questions were additionally asked. No formal incentive for their time was given at the end of the second round of interviews. However, each participant received a card to express gratitude for their time and participation in the process.

Semi-structured interviews, of approximately one hour in length, were conducted for the first interview and follow-up interviews ranged from 15 minutes to over an hour. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) served as a guide for the interview process, but probing clarifying questions were utilized as needed (Hays & Singh, 2014). This type of interview was beneficial because the pace and sequencing of the questions was flexible, and new questions could be posed to gather comprehensive information related to the interviewees' experiences (Hays & Singh, 2014). Interviews were audio-recorded because of their usefulness in obtaining accurate data for later review and transcription (Guest et al., 2013). The researcher additionally took notes during the interview in the

case the recording device failed (Guest et al., 2014). Also, note-taking allowed the researcher to obtain physical behaviors or important moments that may not have be captured by audio alone. Memoing was also completed after interviews to capture "short phrases, ideas, or key concepts that occur[ed] to the reader" (Creswell, 2013, p. 183).

Interviews were conducted on campus, in administrative buildings where meeting room space was available. Each of the premises were fully accessible to both the participant and researcher. Scheduled interviews occurred during the hours of 9 am to 7 pm to accommodate for participant's class schedules and building accessibility during certain hours of the day. The interview protocols discussed in the previous section were used to guide interviews during this time. Data collection and the transcription process happened simultaneously. Each of the 24 interviews was personally transcribed during a period spanning late October to the end of December. All data was secured throughout the process on a password protected computer and stored in the official UT Box Cloud Storage. Since the identity of the participants was confidential, pseudonyms chosen by the participants were used throughout the data analysis and reporting process. Once the interviews were completed, any identifying information was deleted from file sources. Each of the audio files were secured on the UT Box cloud storage until the end of data analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Data analysis occurred in conjunction with the data collection process, beginning with the transcription of the data which included memoing done by the researcher (Creswell, 2013). Once transcriptions were completed, the full texts of each interview were reviewed in their entirety (Creswell, 2013). This review assisted in the development of initial codes for data analysis (Creswell, 2013). Memo notes were also be included in

the review and data analysis process. Qualitative data analysis "involves categorizing text or keywords that are similar to one another (i.e., coding), as well as connecting text or keywords that influence one another (i.e., relationships among codes)" (Hays & Singh, 2014, p. 295). Analysis of the data, therefore, consisted of both inductive and deductive coding (Miles et al., 2014). For inductive coding, the analysis consisted of using codes that emerge from the data (Miles et al., 2014). To be specific, in vivo coding was used as to uncover themes and findings that naturally emerged from the interview analysis (Saldaña, 2016). Process coding, also referred to as "action" coding allowed for the emergence of actions that may have occurred in particular sequences (Saldaña, 2016). Descriptive coding was additionally used to summarize portions of the data or to collapse similar in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016). A combination of the codes used for this study helped to reveal the essence of the personal experiences of the participants related to their activism experiences (Creswell, 2013). The codes generated also described and captured the essence of the activism phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013).

Deductive coding or coding derived from the theoretical framework was additionally utilized (Miles et al., 2014). Coding was completed using the NVivo coding software platform. NVivo is an accessible software application for analyzing various forms of qualitative and quantitative research. The data stored in NVivo was stored on a password-protected computer. The data was uploaded into the system using the transcribed files, and the system assisted in the digital coding process.

Coding occurred in three phases: first round coding to identify emerging themes; second cycle coding to group the themes into significant statements or themes; and third round coding with use of the theoretical framework. The conceptual framework as discussed in chapter two is Collins' (2009) Black feminist thought. The specific component of the framework that guided the theoretical analysis of this study were two

activism domains Collins described as struggles for group survival and institutional transformation. Struggles for group survival are defined as "actions taken to create Black female spheres of influence within existing social structures" (p. 219). Institutional transformation according to Collins involves actions taken to challenge and eliminate discrimination in areas such as housing, education, employment and other public institutions. These two domains were used to understand the activism experiences of the Black women graduate students in this study.

To establish trustworthiness, quality measures used in the study consisted of member checking through the completion of multiple interviews and asking clarifying questions during the interview process (Hays & Singh, 2014). Data results were reviewed by participants in the study, through member checking, to confirm their contributions were accurately represented in the analysis (Hays & Singh, 2014). Peer debriefing was also employed to obtain an external check on the research process and analysis (Creswell, 2013). The use of multiple supplementary sources of data, including interviews, researcher memoing, and journaling, provided sources for effective triangulation during data analysis (Creswell, 2013).

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER THREE

This chapter provided a detailed account of the methodology and a description of the research method and design that was used for this study. The site of study and the population of interest were then addressed regarding selection and recruitment. Data collection instruments and procedures were discussed as well as the process of data analysis. Chapter four presents the findings from the study that were obtained using the methodology employed during the research process.

Chapter Four – Participant Profiles

This chapter presents information on the twelve participants who volunteered for this study. Each participant was sent a short demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D) via email to be completed on a voluntary basis. Of the 12 participants, there were two professional students, six doctoral students, and four masters students. Three participants were representatives from the College of Liberal Arts, four from the College of Education, two from the College of Fine Arts, one from the College of Communications, and two from the professional schools. All the participants were full-time students in their programs. Seven of the participants indicated that they were first-generation students.

The ages of the participants ranged from 22 to 33 years of age. Their hometowns were located in the northeastern, southeastern, and southern parts of the United States. All of the participants identified as either Black or African American. When asked what gender pronouns they preferred, 11 of the participants used she, her, hers, and one participant preferred they, them, theirs. In regard to their gender identity, seven of the participants responded to the open-ended question with female, one with woman, and one with non-binary. Given that a qualitative phenomenological methodology was used for this study, descriptive profiles are provided in the next section as a way to contextualize the responses of each participant. The participants were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms which are reflected below. All the information is representative of the participants experiences but has been written in a manner that maintains the confidentiality of their identities.

BREANNA

Breanna is a master's student who grew up in the northeastern part of the United States. They developed a formal passion for theater which continued until their undergraduate years at an elite university on the East Coast. Although Breanna enjoyed theater, they were hesitant to take formal courses during their college years: "After having done theater all throughout high school I didn't feel like I could access it because I was like, I'm gonna have to go to these classes with all these White people who have all this training." Instead, Breanna found a community of like-minded individuals in a Black arts organization of which they became president of during their freshmen year.

Recalling their experiences in predominately White theater spaces in the past, Breanna noted how important it was to them to create environments where everyone felt included. Breanna particularly wanted to work with youth of color to give the same opportunities they had, in a more welcoming and nurturing context. After college, they decided to pursue professional work related to youth, education and theater. The jobs Breanna obtained, however, became unfulfilling because of the politics involved and the lack of cultural representation within theater organizations. It was then that they decided to pursue their master's degree in a field that combined their interest in performing arts with their love of young people. Once Breanna completes their graduate degree, their goal is to establish their own theater company so that they can write, produce, and direct plays that are reflective of the experiences of people of color.

Breanna became a participant in the study by way of a mutual connection we have at the university. As a person who identifies as a non-binary, femme individual, Breanna wanted to know if they were still welcome to be involved in the study since they did not identify as a woman. I agreed because I felt Breanna's experiences would be a valuable

contribution to the research. Breanna preferred the pronouns they, them, and theirs, which will be used throughout the remainder of this study.

GRACE

Grace, a native of the South, is currently completing a master's degree. As a child, Grace was exposed early on to the educational challenges of students of color. While attending a predominately White elementary school, she noticed how culturally insensitive the teachers were in their interactions with underrepresented students: "They were just treating minority children wrong…. And so, I told my mom… what they're doing isn't right." Grace and her mom advocated for change on behalf of the students at the school yet received backlash from the school administrators. However, the unfavorable circumstances never deterred Grace from speaking her mind and forging ahead to eventually accomplish her mission.

The resilience Grace had as a child remained with her throughout her middle and high school years. Before being accepted to a flagship institution in the South, Grace had to overcome several hardships, which she expressed strengthened her resolve and her faith. As a non-traditional student who started community college at the age of 21, and her bachelor's program at age 24, Grace considered herself blessed to have even had the opportunity to complete a degree: "It's by the grace of God that I'm even here." Now as a master's student, Grace is a proponent of helping others to obtain the same opportunities she had during her college experience. She is a huge proponent of and advocator for study abroad, which was a life changing experience for her. Grace is also an avid supporter of mentoring and empowering Black women within her educational and spiritual spheres. In the future, Grace desires to complete a Ph.D. and to also continue writing books related to her faith and life experiences.

HARPER

Harper is a doctoral student from the Midwest. Raised in a loving and supportive environment, Harper proclaimed, "I'm very grateful for growing up in a family that validated me so much." The validation she received helped her not to internalize the negative perceptions of Black women in society. Because of the lessons of self-valuation Harper had been given by her parents, she gained the confidence to address the discriminatory experiences of Black students attending her high school and university. Harper participated in several initiatives to help those in authority at each of her institutions become aware of the challenges students of color faced in education. She also had a passion for helping others and invested much her time volunteering with children from impoverished backgrounds:

> I saw firsthand some of the inequality in the types of opportunities that students had at, you know, schools that were primarily serving students of color. I saw that they [the schools] were different than [what] I had gone to… we did our best to try and help.

Harper's mentality of passing it forward is reflective of how she navigated life.

Once Harper completed her master's degree, she recalled, "I automatically knew I was gonna get a Ph.D.… because I was like, well I know I need to get the highest possible degree to open up as many opportunities as possible professionally." Harper has been very committed to dispelling the negative tropes pertaining to Black students, and especially Black women. She also has a deep desire to leave a legacy for others to achieve the same opportunities that she and her ancestors have been afforded. "I'm doing something small to like show them that their, you know, legacy is very strong. And that, you know, they've contributed to all that I am. And that the responsibility that I have [is] to pass that on."

JASMINE

Jasmine, is a from a small city she described as a “small White suburb” in the southeastern United States. While growing up in a county that was "90% White," she recalled, "there have been some really interesting experiences in childhood that made me realize like, oh. Not only am I really different, but I’m also Black.” Having parents from two different socioeconomic backgrounds, Jasmine explained, “I ended up with some experiences of seeing issues of class and race through a wide spectrum. So, I saw extreme poverty. And then I saw extreme wealth.” Because of her complex background, Jasmine often wondered “where do I fit in?” As one of 40 Black students in her high school class of 400, Jasmine decided to attend school outside of her hometown to have a different experience.

During her college years, Jasmine found her passion for history and African American studies while taking a Black woman’s history course. Jasmine's college years were however, unique. As a senior, she was a firsthand witness of and participant in the movements against police brutality happening right near her college town. This experience was transformative for her and taught her a multitude of lessons about Black struggle in what she termed as “a city under siege.” Her growth from the experience helped her to be more intentional about her next steps in life.

Seeking a fresh start for her doctoral studies, Jasmine made the decision to enroll in an institution in the South to pursue her research related to Black women serial killers. This research is meaningful to her because of its connection to the trauma experienced by the Black community when lives are taken unexpectedly by police violence. Jasmine plans to continue her research in hopes of bringing new perspectives on Black women to the field of history.

KAI

Kai, a doctoral student, grew up in the Midwest in what she described as an impoverished community. She recalled, “I didn’t know we were poor until it came time to apply for college, which is so funny ‘cause my parents are like, our situation is our situation." Kai, however, had several strong women in her family such as her grandmother who inspired her through their success. Spirituality has also been a prominent part of how Kai has faced adversity throughout her life: “So I was born with a paralyzed left arm. My family calls me the miracle baby. Umm, so my faith also plays a really big role in how I move forward and transcend over obstacles.”

Attending a predominately Black elementary and middle school allowed Kai to develop an understanding of her Black identity at an early age:

> Throughout school, I was always the other. I wasn't a typical Black girl. I wasn't; I was too smart. But I also was cute, sometimes. Um, even though I didn't think I was. And I tried to fit into the popular group. A lot of people knew me, but I was too smart to be in the Black group in high school. Um, and then too Black to be in the smart group (laughs), umm with all the AP kids. I was a nerd. Like I also athletic. So, I was a lot of different things I didn't fit into whatever box folks tried to put me in.

Kai continued to encounter challenges related to her identity as a Black woman. Despite the negative experiences, Kai persisted and is now working to create a better graduate experience for other students of color as she completes her Ph.D. She stated the doctoral degree, however, is not her ultimate goal at this moment in her life: "I don’t even care about the Ph.D. This means a whole lot to me for *us* [Black people], right? The community." Her mission is to help others by demystifying the process of obtaining a Ph.D. Kai plans to continue publishing inspirational works about her life experiences that she hopes will significantly impact the lives of others.

MARY

Mary, a student in a professional school, was raised in a predominately White suburb of a major Midwestern city. She explained that she had "very much like a wholesome, upbringing," in a traditional family. Mary discussed how her parents always had the privilege of choosing to live in nicer neighborhoods with sound school systems. They wanted the best for their children and knew education was the key. Mary, after graduating from college, decided to move to California for grad school instead of staying in the Midwest for college like her peers. She was initially an International Relations major but later changed to American Studies and Ethnicity. In college, Mary became privy to the challenges that people of color, particularly Black individuals, faced in society. The experience was eye-opening for her, and her increased awareness led her to seek out more information on the legacy of Black struggle in America.

Once she completed college, Mary went to grad school in New York. Upon completing her master's, she moved to Los Angeles to work in the field of higher education. After noticing the underlying differences between wealthier and poor school systems, she was disturbed:

> It was just really frustrating because I was like, I'm not creating systemic change you know? Like I'm having the same conversations here and there. But like the symptoms are the same. And it's affecting the same people. And, so, I think that's kind of like when I seriously started thinking about [professional] school. I had always rejected it [before].

Mary decided to apply to a professional school in the South and was accepted. She expressed that she appreciates her experience in the professional school environment because of the strategic thinking skills it provides. In the future, she desires to be a "strategic thought partner" who transforms the governance processes of major companies.

MELISSA

Melissa, a doctoral student, was born in the Caribbean and migrated to the United States at the age of 10. She spent most of her adolescent years in a southern city, which she considered her "second hometown." Education was a priority for her family as she explained, "for a lot of immigrants who come to this country they feel it's really important that the children succeed and do well. Umm, and so, I was pushed to, you know, excel, and I think I did that." Melissa attended a university in the south, majoring in pre-law. While volunteering with middle school students, she recalled, "just kind of really seeing how students struggle. And how they talked about their not connecting with their teachers. It just made me- remind myself of my relationship with White teachers, in middle school, high school." This experience led Melissa to change her major to education and to also major in Africana Studies.

After graduating with her bachelor's degree, Melissa worked with high school students at a school that was reconstituted or taken over by the state. She recounted dealing with these circumstances, "just made teaching really… difficult. Umm, as far as lack of autonomy. Not being able to teach the kids, and the students things that I felt would empower them. Make them, critical thinkers." Because of this, Melissa "started thinking about policy a lot more," which essentially led her to pursue her Ph.D. Today, Melissa also focuses a lot of her energy on her children who are now the motivation behind her activism: "I think a lot of my activism is just raising my children. Raising my boys to respect other people, and teaching them about umm, personal space. And saying no." Melissa plans to continue her research on policies that affect teacher shortages across the nation to better the educational environment for not only her children but future generations to come.

MICHELLE

Michelle was born and raised in the South in a racially divided city. Recollecting on her formative years, Michelle expressed, “I was like deemed like gifted and talented, younger in life.” Her mom chose to keep her schooled within their neighborhood in spite of the opportunities presented from schools in the predominately White area. Michelle was appreciative of this choice as she realized the value of being educated by people with similar identities. For high school, Michelle enrolled in a magnet program which focused on science, technology, journalism, and mathematics. Since she was good at math, she desired to be in a STEM field, but later realized, "I was good at it, but I hated it.” After graduating from high school, Michelle attended a private university in her hometown.

She recounted that college “was like a completely different ball game.” Michelle majored in business and was the only Black woman in the program during her years there. She remembered not wanting to continue the program, however encouragement from others led her to stay. It was a great decision for Michelle, as she built several significant relationships with faculty, staff, and administrators in her program, and on campus. Because of her connections, she was able to significantly advocate for the students at her university.

Once Michelle completed her degree, she moved to a major East Coast city, where she was constantly exposed to activist movements. While living there, she recalled "finding her voice" as a result of her experiences. After working for a few years, Michelle felt it was necessary for her to come back to school to complete her master’s degree. As a graduate student, Michelle desires to get more involved with the students on campus and engage in more campus climate discussions. She also stated, "I’m looking forward to like developing my activism, and finding how to still be an activist within [my professional field].”

NICOLE

Nicole, a doctoral student, is a native of Chicago, Illinois. From 7th through 12th grade Nicole was enrolled in a small talented and gifted program where she developed her first interests in feminism and identity politics. Her interest in these areas continued even after her enrollment in an all-women's Historically Black College and University where she majored in journalism and media studies. Her position as editor in chief of the university magazine "cemented [her] interests in women and media, particularly Black women in media." The experience of attending an HBCU was inspirational to Nicole:

> I had so many different models of like, different kinds of Black women. Like, the head of our department was a Black gay woman. Um, one of my professors used to work at *Essence* and she was a mom and she would bring her kid to class if she needed to, and she stayed late hours with us, and her kid was right there with her. Um like we had this speaker series, of like our president would bring different people to talk to us. We literally saw all kinds of people…. Our president was a Black woman. So, like, there were no limits to what we could do on campus. Like, literally you could do whatever you wanted to do. So, to have that for four years was like, incredible. You could literally do whatever you wanted to do. And you could be who you wanted to be, whatever.

Nicole then started a master's degree at a large HBCU in the South in an English and African American literature program. However, she expressed, it was not the right program for her. After moving back to Texas with her husband, and having a child, Nicole pursued a master's degree at a predominately White institution, an experience that was very different from her HBCU. Now a doctoral student at the same institution, Nicole has integrated her love of media into her scholarship which focuses on issues of race and gender: "I think that like… my media training, and my activism are like, they have to be linked because media is such a powerful tool." As the mother of one son, Nicole also expressed parenting was another form of her activism that was very

important. Today, Nicole continues to use her influence as both a parent and a student to promote positive change.

NNEKA

Nneka grew up in a major Texas city, but her family is originally from a country in West Africa She participated in debate during her high school career, and noted, "reading and writing was always, like, my strong suit." Nneka attended a private university during her undergraduate career and majored in political science and economics. She stated, in retrospect, "it was still a really great college experience. 'Cause, [my university] was still a very open, atmosphere. So, like [a] very open cultural atmosphere." Starting her first year in college, Nneka explained, "I'll say I wanted to go to law school because I really just wanted power, you know." Having a law degree meant, "people listen to you more." Her family, as well as others she knew, held lawyers in high esteem:

> There's just a certain social capital and political cache that comes with having a JD. So, I decided to go to law school. And like, while now my law is currently, probably less community focused, I think I'm still sort of fascinated by power structures, generally.

Nneka's experiences in the law school revealed that there were issues of race and gender that needed to be addressed in her profession. Because her field was White and predominately male, Nneka understood that not everyone felt welcome in professional school. As a result, she became engaged in an organization that wanted to bring a diverse group of lawyers to campus to speak on topics related to marginalized populations. Nneka expressed, her experiences planning a social justice student conference have been very impactful and a highlight of her college experience. The conference is important to her because it provides a space for all individuals to feel comfortable in her program and

to feel like their voices are heard. Nneka plans to continue her career in law working primarily in the corporate area. However, she still desires to explore issues of power within her field.

SASHA

Sasha, a master's student from a Midwestern city, attended the flagship university in her state for undergrad. It was during her time at the university, she explained, that she began "growing within like, my Blackness, " or understanding her identity as a Black woman. As a psychology major in the McNair Scholars program, Sasha remembered having an "ok experience with the psychology professors [she] did research for." However, her interactions with one professor made her question if she wanted to pursue a graduate degree in the field. When she determined the answer was no, she applied to a women and gender studies program. Her participation in courses within the discipline helped her establish a foundational knowledge of feminist frameworks.

During her undergraduate experience, a racist incident occurred on Sasha's campus involving a Greek organization. This incident disturbed her in many ways and prompted her to become more involved in organizations connected to her identity. The lack of representation of Black women in higher education had also been particularly disturbing for Sasha. Once she became critically conscious of the intersectional issues of racism, sexism, and gender identity present within college settings, she began to devote her studies to these concerns. Her research interests are centered on the experiences of Black women faculty and administration. Sasha's goal is to become a faculty member within the field of women and gender studies. She desires to obtain this position so that she can provide mentorship and guidance to other Black women aspiring to pursue a career in postsecondary education.

SHERRI

Sherri is a master's student who hails from a city in the southern United States. She expressed that as a child she had the opportunity to attend great public institutions from middle to high school. She was grateful for the experiences and noted "there've been like teachers along the way who really helped with my education." The solid foundation of learning that Sherri received proved beneficial. She later pursued her bachelor's degree at a private university in a major Southern city, where at first, she thought she would major in a discipline related to math or science. But she recalled, "I hated labs." She did, however, connect to art history because as she explained, "I'm good at visual analysis. I love looking at artwork and interpreting it. And I love doing the research behind the artwork. So, I went in that direction."

After graduating from college, Sherri started doing assistant registrar work in an art gallery in the southwestern U.S. She stated, "I enjoyed my experiences. I loved showing up to work every day. I loved the arts. So, it told me I was in the right field, but I wasn't going in the direction that I wanted." So, after completing a year and a half of work, Sherri decided to pursue her master's degree. Because of her concentration in Mezzo American Art, Sherri felt she wasn't as connected to the Black experience through her work. She, therefore, sought out other ways to connect her identity as a Black woman to her love for art by doing tours for two art galleries on her campus. Sherri wants to continue to work in art spaces educating others on the historical narratives of Black struggle displayed through art. Teaching in artistic areas is significant to her because ultimately, art is "about Black people overcoming those horrors and still being able to find something positive about themselves, and about their bodies and their experiences."

CHAPTER FOUR SUMMARY

Each of the participant profiles provided illustrates the diverse backgrounds and perspectives the women brought with them to the research. Through their discussions on activism, they formulated a broad new way of thinking about activism. The next chapter presents a small glimpse of the expansive conceptual contributions the women gave related to the topic of activism.

Chapter Five – Findings

This chapter presents the findings from data obtained through a demographic questionnaire as well as an initial and follow-up interview. To reiterate, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to examine the activism experiences of Black women graduate students. The questions guiding this investigation were chosen to provide an understanding of how the participants defined activism, how they described their activism experience, and factors that influenced their activism. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do Black women graduate students at a public predominately White institution (PWI) define activism?
2. How do Black women graduate students at a public PWI describe their activism experiences and those of their peers?
3. What do Black women graduate students at a public PWI perceive as factors that influence their activism?
4. How does the activism of Black women graduate students at a public PWI influence their student experience?

The following four sections include the findings for each research question, as well as accompanying themes. The final section gives a summary of the chapter.

RESEARCH QUESTION ONE: DEFINITION OF ACTIVISM

An open coding analysis of the qualitative data collected from participant interviews was used to answer the first research question regarding how Black women graduate students define activism. The participants were asked probing questions to obtain their responses regarding their initial thoughts on activism and how they

interpreted the term. No formal definition of activism was provided during the interview process so that the participants were able to contribute their uninhibited perspectives on the topic. The fact that the participants were not given a formal description of activism did not mean that their responses were entirely free from outside influences. In fact, their formative experiences, interactions with others, historical knowledge, and the media were all factors that shaped how they came to understand and define activism.

Overall, the participants did not adhere to one uniform definition of the word, which revealed the complexity involved in defining the term. This was not surprising considering their backgrounds and experiences were very diverse. Some of the participants immediately began to explain what activism meant to them personally, as well as how their peers or colleagues might validate or invalidate their responses. Others provided very visual and active images of the different ways in which activism was performed both in the past and present day. One aspect of defining activism that the women agreed on was the fact that they had never really been asked their opinion on the topic, especially how they made meaning of the word.

Although the participants noted how often the term activism was used in every day conversations, the fact that they were rarely, if ever, asked about their formal conceptions of the topic was unexpected. The process of meaning-making the participants engaged in for this study, therefore, presented them with a new opportunity to interrogate their preconceptions of activism, and simultaneously, generate new understandings of concept. In the following sections three findings will be discussed: 1) defining activism is complex; 2) activism happens in different ways along a continuum; 3) activism comes with expectations. A discussion of these findings will provide a comprehensive view of the insightful and nuanced ways in which the women, as well as others, defined activism.

Finding # 1: Defining Activism was Complex

As noted prior, the participants' discussions of activism illustrated the richness and depth of how they defined the term activism. Their interpretations of the word were affected by their values, beliefs, the perspectives of others, historical activist movements, as well as influences from various forms of social media. Some of the participants alluded to the fluidity of the term while others assigned meaning using words such as "advocacy," "change," and "pushing back against systems." Each of these definitions provided a composite description of what activism meant to them.

Fluidity. The complexity of defining the term activism for the participants was in some respects attributed to the "fluid," or non-prescribed ways in which they interpreted the concept. Melissa, for instance, noted the difficulty involved in defining the word: "I just think it's something that… it's really fluid. It's hard to define and say, you know, who is or who isn't an activist." Melissa continued to say, since the occurrence of events such as those in Ferguson, people now "have these real hard definitions about, you're an activist, you're not." Other participants also alluded to the "hard" definitions Melissa referenced in her response. They explained their conceptions of activism were linked to the physical demonstrations of the 1950s and 1960s.

Sherri's initial discussion of activism was at first, primarily influenced by her historical framework of activism which involved marches, protests, and movements:

> I feel like protests- I would say that protest has changed. Um, I guess a part of me is hesitant to leave its old definition…. And, that's the protesting that I've been kind of taught, was like the real hard-hitting, make-a-change protesting.

However, the boundaries of what could be considered activism became more fluid for Sherri as the interview progressed. Sherri eventually began to question her own initial beliefs, and shifted from a "hard" definition of activism to one that was more inclusive:

> But you know what? Can't like a Black poetry collective that meets, and reads about, um, the injustices they face for being Black, queer, etcetera, be a form of protest? Like why can't just people meeting, and acknowledging their struggle be a form of protest, in a sense?

Upon critical reflection, Sherri formed a new conceptualization of activism that was more expansive. In a similar vein, Jasmine discussed the evolution of her definition of activism.

Jasmine's experiences as a senior in college during the Black Lives Matter protests significantly impacted how she viewed and described the topic of activism. When asked about her definition of the word activism she stated,

> I would say from, you know, when I started college to when I started grad school, my definition of activism became far more radical. Not necessarily politically radical. But maybe that too. But, like, literally, physically, combatively, radical, which I normally would not have expected from myself if you had asked me, you know, five years ago, six years ago, what I'd say. It was just different, you know. It would have been something more… bordering on philanthropic because that's what I did growing up.

As Jasmine developed as an activist, her definition of activism became what she described as more radical in comparison to Sherri, who instead became more accepting of activism that was not as "hard-hitting." Each of the participants, however, established nuanced ideas of the term activism over time that mirrored their ways of knowing and understanding. Nicole summed up the fluidity in defining activism best when she stated, "it depends on one, your level of commitment to it [activism], and your identity…. my definition of activism might be similar to yours because we're both Black women, but it also depends on how… we view our actions as…activist." As Nicole highlighted in her response, the definitions of activism given by the participants were similar in some regards and differed in others. They all, however, concurred activism essentially meant change through action.

Change through advocacy and pushing back. Creating change for the betterment of the community emerged as a phrase that most embodied what activism meant for the women. In discussing her definition of activism, Jasmine explained, "I would define activism as like, being, or engaging in, behaviors, activities, or, maybe other methods to evoke change…I would say maybe change in stages. Change both in the immediate, and then change in the future." Expanding on the temporal aspect of activism through change over time, she further stated, "I think activism has a very legitimate, and real, and necessary purpose in the here and now. But I also think the historian in me says activism has a long-term trajectory," one which required "those who are in it to understand the selflessness of its entirety." Change and selflessness were also a part of Melissa's meaning of activism.

Melissa suggested there were "two core components of activism" used when defining the word: "recognizing that something is wrong, and then creating change." She further expressed the definition of activism was also, "very idiosyncratic. It's very contextual." For Melissa, learning about the inequities in a community as well as the causes of these issues was also an integral part of defining activism. The knowledge gained could be used as an impetus for motivating self and others to act. To emphasize, she asserted, "I don't think activism is about self. I think it's about community. Umm, and kind of creating that change. So, it's about that recognition, and it's about that change." It is important to note, the selflessness Jasmine and Melissa described was a value many of the women suggested was an essential characteristic of an activist. Giving of themselves to the point of depletion was, however, the primary reason for the women's eventual burnout as will be discussed in the findings for research question two. In spite of their exhaustion, advocacy and resistance against institutions and systems continued to be a central part of how they created change.

Change for the women was accomplished through both advocating for others and "pushing back." Advocacy for Michelle encompassed "seeing where there are inequities in situations… and saying, I'm gonna advocate on these individuals' behalf." Michelle found it especially important to use her activism to advocate for silenced individuals, and those who were not able to advocate for themselves. Pushing back against systems was another way in which the participants defined activism. Speaking from their own experiences, Breanna felt pushing back involved "actively working towards deconstructing an oppressive structure in society." Harper expressed similar sentiments and added, "it's really umm, intentionally going against, or challenging, or, you could say, rebelling. Going against a set system that one does not agree with. Or umm, that one does not feel characterizes them." For Nicole, advocating for others and pushing back were not only ways in which she defined activism, but also tools used to address concerns she had within her graduate institution.

As the only Black doctoral student, Nicole understood that "my presence in my department is already a political thing." She continued to explain,

> I mean you can be Black and not necessarily political… but even with me being the Black student in my department, I also intentionally always question whatever. Like if we're talking about, I don't know, Woody Allen, like, what's the race implication? What's the gender? Like I'm always, like challenging and pushing back against that.

Because of the lack of representation in her department she used her voice to advocate for the inclusion of Black individuals in media, a change she felt was very much needed, yet not addressed. Several of the participants conceded that change through action was at the core essence of what activism meant to them. They further revealed that activism happened in several different ways and spaces.

Finding # 2: Activism Happened in Different Ways, Along a Continuum

When defining activism, the participants also discussed multiple examples of activist engagement to provide support and contextualization for their responses. Activism, according to the participants, happened both individually and collectively, and in several forms. Additionally, they noted that there are different levels of engagement among individuals, which illustrated how activism occurred along a continuum. In discussing what came to mind when she thought of activism, Sasha explained,

> Activism has like, just so many different connotations because I feel like, activism, is like what you do in your community. Activism is what you do online. Activism is what you do like, with friends, by yourself. It's very like – activism can be like, anything that you want it to be and I think that's what I like about it.

The versatility of activism invoked in Sasha's description was also evident in Harper's discussion of how activism manifested. Harper proposed, "even in like a one-on-one conversation, or a micro level interaction, that someone can practice activism." Activism, which Harper defined as, "standing up for what you believe in" could be accomplished with multiple people, through various measures including, "protesting, or attending a rally of some sort, or writing your congressman, or congressperson. Ummm, even being conscious to say congressperson instead of congressman like I just did." For her "being aware of those kinds of things can all be considered activism." The participants further observed and remarked on how their peers also participated in diverse forms of activism.

Mary recognized differences in the way two of her closest friends performed activism. Her partner participated in activities that were focused on creating sustainable communities through more covert means, whereas her friend displayed a more aggressive approach to change:

> I think for him it was a little bit more broad. It was about speaking at panels. And we would be invited to come and talk to groups about the work they were doing. And then it would be community events. And umm, educational seminars for

> parents. And it was kind of a holistic, how do we build healthy sustainable communities? So that was his activism. And then her activism was a little bit more like, yeah. Not… strategic. But it was more about wanting to be heard, and like wanting to be seen. And more aggressive I think. A little bit more like, I want to spark something. Like, I want to rile people up. Umm, and so I think they both have very different approaches.

Nneka also reflected on the ways others she interacted with involved themselves in activist efforts she considered to be non-traditional. Reflecting on the work of professionals in her field she explained, "the lawyers who went to airports the day after, the evening of Trump's, like travel ban was announced. I mean to me that's activism." She asserted, although the lawyers were not marching or holding signs like other protesters, they were, "doing something to help people who are being injured by, um this rule of law. They're like by helping these people. They're umm, displaying their disposition towards this rule of law. And I think that's what activism is." Mary and Nneka's comments illustrated not only how activism happens in different ways, but also that there is a continuum of activist engagement.

Continuum of activist engagement. The definitions and examples of activism the participants provided contained a range of activist efforts. Sasha said it most succinctly when she stated, "[activism is] one of the most basic things. And it could be [the] extreme of things." Thinking about activism within the educational sphere, Harper, made an interesting comparison between those in "ivory tower" post-secondary institutions versus those within the community:

> There's probably more groups, but I'm thinking of two main ones right now. One being umm, sort of like your Black scholars, Black elites. Ivory tower. The other being kind of more radical. Like, in the streets, not up in the ivory tower, but, you know, pounding the pavement, grassroots type thing…. You also have your like, street philosophers…They may not have the, like, formal education always, but they're still very passionate about the issues that affect them. And they are willing to do as much as they can. They may have limited resources financially, or

> networks wise. And may not know who all to go to and who to write letters too. But, they're fired up in wanting to [do] what they can.

For Harper, Black scholars, grassroots organizers, and street philosophers were all completing work for the betterment of the community, but on very different ends of the activist continuum. Harper further suggested, the change efforts of each type of activist might be valued differently, perhaps because of the presence, or lack thereof, of a performative element displayed in their work. Jasmine, however, understood that varying types of roles and levels of commitment within a movement was necessary.

Being an active member of protests against police brutality, Jasmine knew the stressors that continuous activism could have on an individual. The discussion of her experiences provided a detailed example of how essential it is to have a representation of varying types of activists.

> I do think though that like, not everybody who does activism is an activist. I think those are very different things. And I think there are people who are activist for a moment. And we need those people. And there are people who are activists for a movement. We need those people. And then I think there are people who are activists for life, who just sincerely are interested in the betterment of their world and future worlds. And some of those people are paid to do it. And some of those people are not paid to do it. And they just, whatever the cause is, even if it's not like what they understand, their propriety, they understand it to be their priority. So, there are just those people who are intrinsically 100% activist. Someone like an Angela Davis obviously. But then there are plenty of other lower name, not as high-ranking people…. There are people who just want to fight. Fight the good fight. And understand the power of bodies and understand the power of selflessness to put themselves and their resources on the line. Of course, we need those people too.

Jasmine felt that all levels of engagement on the continuum were critical to the movement. People performed activism based on their personal skills, talents, and also their circumstances. Jasmine recognized early on that no one could be a perfect activist who was always immersed in a fighting for a cause. She, along with the other participants, was also cognizant of the fact that not everyone agreed with their opinions

on the significance of activism. Sometimes the expectations associated with being an activist were not always positive.

Finding # 3: The Term Activism Came with Expectations

Activism was a term that carried a lot of power or weight according to the participants. The reasons they gave for their sentiments primarily related to the negative connotations associated with the term. Several of the participants expressed that being an activist also comes with certain expectations that are not always appealing and which can create undue hardships.

Preconceived negative expectations. The expectations linked with activism made affiliating with the term problematic. Nicole, for instance, expressed, "When you label someone an activist, there's expectations that come with that. And, because you're human, you're not gonna live up to them. And so, I think that that's where the negativity comes from." The "checklist" of responsibilities activists were supposed to accomplish, according to Nicole, was the measuring stick by which others judged an individual's legitimacy: "If you don't do XYZ, then like, how are you an activist? Or, if you say anything wrong, you will get dragged. And then it's like you're canceled. It's like, maybe. But is that really helpful? No, it's not." Michelle also observed how those who labeled themselves as activists were held to unachievable standards. She explained, "people put like activism in their bio on twitter these days. And if I see that, that doesn't bother me. Umm, I don't look at it, one way or the other." Although she had no issues with how others chose to identify themselves, she expressed, "some people look at it and they're just like, 'Humph! That person is always gonna be talking about something. They're always gonna be doing that social justice thing." Michelle also believed the reactions

given by others, whether positive or negative, were reflective of the community they served.

Breanna recognized how limited views of activism lessened the importance of work that was not necessarily aligned with time-honored methods of resistance:

> People have like, a very specific idea. Like, you have to be doing all of these things to be considered an activist. Like if you're not doing all these things you're not that. Umm, which diminishes the ways that people are actually engaging in other ways. And how it looks different ways, especially for people who are like, striving for liberation for their own selves and their own communities.

The negative connotations of activism, in general, appeared to do more harm than good to those participating in work for the betterment of their communities. And even though the participants recognized that the extreme responsibilities placed on activists were unrealistic, they were still mostly hesitant to associate themselves with the label.

Am I an activist? When asked about their relationship with the term activism, there were several occasions when the women took pause or struggled to give a definitive response to the question. Some had just never thought about their identity as an activist, while others avoided the term because of the harsh expectations connected to the role. Grace was grateful for the opportunity to reflect on the topic: "Thank you for making me question whether or not I'm an activist. Even though I'm sitting here talking, I still don't really know…. I don't take it for granted. I don't just sit and reflect over my activism." For her, activism was just a part of who she was as a person: "So, I don't equate it to 'oh I'm being an activist today.' Or me doing this is being an activist. It's like [I see] a need and doing something about it." For Grace, activism was interconnected with her personal identity. Breanna felt comfortable using the word "organizer" but did relate to the activist label. They explained, "I mean if someone's like 'are you an activist?' I'd be like sure. But

I don't like putting myself forth as that." While Breanna seemed to be in the middle of the continuum, Harper did not at first identify as an activist.

Harper's view of activists as rebellious was one reason she denied the label, as she did not fit that characteristic. Upon reflection, Harper began to explore the idea of who she was within an activist framework:

> But, maybe I am [an activist]. I don't know. I mean- 'cause if, for me, I'm just doing what I love, right? Like, I like learning. I like reading, and I like writing, and I like talking about what I'm reading and writing. So, I - in my head, I'm not really like 'Oh I'm being rebellious' but I think in the context of our world, where, um, we - where society is rampant with inequality, umm, and there are so many negative stereotypes about Black women, and Black people, um, I think, what I'm doing could be considered activism (laughs). And I know activism - but I don't personally, like wake-up feeling like I'm an activist because I wake up feeling like I enjoy my Ph.D. program and I'm just, I like my career and I just want that.

Similar to Grace, Harper understood what activism was, but had not thought in depth about her identity in relation to the concept. However, throughout the interview, she began to understand how her experiences connected her to an agent of change role.

The findings for research question one collectively answered the question of how Black women graduate students defined activism. The first finding suggested the definition of activism was complicated, in that it was fluid, or continuously evolving. However, the participants agreed that the essence of the term encompassed change for the betterment of their communities. The participants further elaborated on their definitions of activism in finding two as they described the many ways in which activism occurs. The women also revealed in finding three, that the term activism has negative connotations that influenced their relationship with the term activism. The interviews indirectly provided the women with time and space to contemplate their activism and to interrogate their personal views on the subject. The next section will present findings for

the second research question examining how the women described their own activism experiences.

RESEARCH QUESTION TWO: DESCRIBING ACTIVISM

The second research question investigated how Black women graduate students describe their activism experiences and those of their peers. The participants provided insightful information during their discussions. Seven findings emerged from the data, of which the first six are representative of the phases of activism the women progressed through over their lifetime:1) recognizing injustice and understanding identity; 2) learning and developing the language; 3) observing and testing the waters; 4) performing activism; 5) burnout and introspection; 6) reconciliation and expanded perspectives; 7) activism came with challenges and consequences.

Conversations with the participants regarding their activism indicated that there are phases of activism, or specific periods they advanced through as they developed their relationship to activism. Their development began first with the participants recognizing that there were inequities in their world. Simultaneously they also became conscious how their identities influenced their interactions with others. A period of learning then commenced in which the participants gained new information that helped them to articulate the things they had observed but never had the language to explain. Once equipped with tools of resistance, the participants began to "test the waters" of activism through what they considered, introductory acts, before moving into full-fledged activism. Performing activism, or executing their visions for change, was the next step for the participants. Their forms of activism were multifaceted, and each had varying levels of engagement. Burnout eventually led them to a period of introspection where they reflected on the consequences of their activism, and how they could do the work, but yet

preserve themselves. After accepting that their expectations of themselves may have been unrealistic, the participants reconciled their former conceptions of activism with their new-found perspectives. While participating in activist efforts, several challenges arose, causing the participants to deal with the consequences associated with their work. However, these experiences strengthened their resolve and commitment to their causes. An in-depth discussion of each of these findings follows.

Finding #1: Phase One - Recognizing Injustice and Understanding Identity

The participants established the foundation of their activist engagement during their formative years. At early points in their life, they began to recognize the problems that plagued the communities in which they lived. Grace, for instance, began to observe the differences between right and wrong at a young age and took measures to address them. Grace recalled the story of what she considered her earlier activism which involved two boys in her neighborhood who stole her brother's wagon. Knowing something was amiss, Grace, who was two at the time, went to retrieve the cart for her brother. Although she did not remember any of this personally, she explained that her mother was shocked when Grace returned with the wagon: **"**The boys that took the wagon, were pulling *me*, in my brother's wagon, back down to my house. I don't know what I said, but I think that this kinda alludes to my life." Grace stood up for her brother and as a result, was able to recover his rightful property. Though the full implications of this scenario may not have been evident to Grace at the age of two, she was able to interpret and respond to a situation she felt needed to change.

Melissa was older when she started to observe differences in the treatment of women and men in her church and within her household. She eventually began to inquire why the roles given to women in her church were not the same as men. Melissa expressed

that her questions, however, were not answered "in a way that completely made sense for my thirteen, fourteen-year-old head. Umm, because it just- it just didn't seem fair." She then noticed the same gendered discrepancies materialize in her household:

> Umm, and even in my household, umm, as a middle child, my older brother got away with a lot that I didn't get away with. And then, whenever I asked my parents about it, or even just chores, their answer was 'you're the girl. You have to do this.' I'm like what? … he doesn't have to learn how to cook? Isn't he gonna be on his own?... So, I think- I guess some people might say that's activism? I don't necessarily think so. I think that's just kind of like the early stages of me formulating and questioning certain things.

These early stages of recognition for Melissa led her to challenge those in authority on matters that did appear to be fair or equitable. Melissa did not consider simple questioning to be activism on her part. However, low risk opportunities to confront inequitable situations were integral to the development of her future activism.

As the participants learned about themselves through the development of their racial identities, they became aware of the how being Black affected their experiences with others. For example, the educators at Kai's primary school were very forthright when teaching students about their Black cultural history:

> …Going to an all-Black elementary and middle school like, situated me in my Blackness very early on. So, I'm talking first grade, we saw pictures in our textbooks, umm with like whelps on our ancestor's backs. And I went to the African American history museum, where it was not sugar coated what slavery was like. What it means to be Black, umm, both from the traumatic aspects of slavery to the triumphant, of just the preservation of our cultures. So, umm, I was like a little mini woke kid (laughs) from the beginning.

The information Kai learned proved beneficial, as it exposed her to the historical challenges of being a person of color and the legacy of racism and discrimination in the United States. However, Kai expressed, "I still wasn't aware of what it meant to be Black

until I got to high school." Similar to Kai, high school was a pivotal time in which Jasmine dealt with the implications of her Black identity in an educational setting.

Jasmine's research project on the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama was assignment that did not garner the support of her history teacher. She explained, "he didn't like that I was taking newspaper articles and really challenging the narrative. And using race to understand what was happening. And he basically said that he was gonna give me a pretty low score on that paper." Her teacher ultimately gave her a score that would have required her to take the final to a receive an A in the class. An A grade would mean she had a chance at being valedictorian at her school. Nonetheless, after approaching her teacher about increasing her overall grade, she was prohibited from taking the final exam. Jasmine recalled his response: "And so, he told me no way there would be a Black female, Black valedictorian at [her] high school…. So, he gave me the highest B possible which was like 92.4…. and said not on his watch." Jasmine could have negatively internalized the situation with her history teacher. She instead critically examined what transpired and how it related to her Black identity.

An experience that was meant to be denigrating for Jasmine turned out to be an impetus for her future scholarly activism. She explained, "Lo and behold I come to grad school and study history about Black people (laughs) so it didn't work very well for him. But I was like, that's an interesting moment, which you see race play out very obviously." Jasmine's experience offered a poignant example of situations in which the participants encountered unfair situations which prompted them to critically examine the relationship between race and inequity. This initial phase was a period where the participants were primed, in rather unfortunate ways, on the realities of navigating society

as a person of color. However, they were not fully able to describe or articulate what they experienced and were ultimately theorizing about the world.

Finding # 2: Phase Two - Learning and Developing the Language

As the participants continued to build their sense of identity, they acquired skills and knowledge that enabled them to contextualize their past and present experiences. While completing coursework in high school and throughout college, they gained the language they needed to adequately express their concerns. Sasha, for instance, began to develop her understanding of race and gender through self-guided exploration. Her first encounter with feminism in high school prompted her learn more about the things she did could not initially comprehend:

> I would say like; high school's when I started I guess, quote 'waking up.' (chuckles). Um, I guess like, I didn't really know, what feminism was and it's kind of like, um, I had to learn on my own. It's kind of like, where… the internet comes in, with Tumblr. And you're on Tumblr, and you're like looking at these different issues with feminism and intersectionality. And you're learning like; there are other people and other activists. Oh, this is what it is.

Social media served as Sasha's first introduction to feminism. However, an undergraduate women and gender studies class provided her with a more comprehensive understanding. As Sasha gained conceptual knowledge related to White supremacy and feminism she realized, "these are all the words I didn't have before, and now I have them. And so, it kind of like, just shaped my feminism. I'm like, ok, this is the first step…that was the building block I needed." Her engagement in the classroom gave Sasha the tools she needed to grasp the broader feminist movement and explore her relationship to feminism.

During the learning and developing the language phase the participants were further, introduced to the concept of activism. Additionally, they began to connect how

resistance could serve as a means of addressing the problems they were now able to identify within their communities. For example, Sherri noted her introduction to the concept of activism was in high school. However, she recalled, "looking back [on] my high school experiences, I still, I was engaged in a very… a very like, superficial understanding of activism. You know like racism, bad. Equality good. But not really understanding the nuances and intricacies of it."

Mary found the practical resources and competence she needed to explore the concept of activism within her degree program. After being an International Relations major, Mary switched to American Studies and Ethnicity. She noted, "I kind of found that major by happenstance. But I think that was, kind of my turning point. Ummm, becoming engaged in learning about like what is activism. And I think that was my first time having a Black professor." The opportunity to engage in what she deemed "difficult conversations" was important because "I had never had anything like that before you know? Like all the conversations about race were within my family." For Mary, the in-class discussions happened at the right time as she was "very into like, Tumblr. And was like oh my gosh, what can I find? What can I read? Who's this? Who's this? What's happening? You know… empowering to me to like, be able to name things that you have experienced." She eventually came to understand how issues of racism were not just something she encountered on a personal level but part of a more extensive system.

In the learning and developing the language phase, the participants gained the expertise they needed to convey their thoughts on issues they considered problematic. They also attained working knowledge of ways to rectify these issues. As their interest in activism grew, they began to place themselves in various spaces where they could observe others who were more seasoned in the area of affecting change.

Finding # 3: Phase Three - Observing Activism and Testing the Waters

Exposure to activist environments and individuals who engaged in resistance work was an opportunity many of the participants noted was transformative. In some instances, they observed and interacted with peers who were committed to activism on their campuses. At other times the participants made it their duty to become more involved in their cities. Michelle recalled how the ease of access to activist movements in New York, for instance, influenced her desire to become involved in various causes:

> But yeah, [the city] is where I really kind of like, found a voice. Or kind of found who I was. Just because it was so much, easier to find people who had those same voices. Umm, it was always something going on. Like, and, … so the people who were quote, unquote leading the movements of like Black Lives Matters, and umm, change and stuff; they were either in New York or they were in LA. So, it was just like, you know, you have like the DeRay McKessons who were just in New York, just because. Or you had like the Nettas [Johnetta Elzie] and like all these people who were just there. So, it was like, [say] something happened…. they were like, alright let's go do something.

New York was a place where Michelle felt more inclined to take part in community gatherings, even if they were not related to an area of interest for her. She recalled, "even if they weren't talking about things that I was actively engaged with… I was like; I'll go learn about this just because I wanna be in those spaces to see like how these things work." Engaging with influential activist leaders was necessary for Michelle because doing so allowed her to get know the individuals and the inner workings of their organizing operations.

Sherri's involvement in the art world provided her with a glimpse of how activism could be used by artists to provide counternarratives on the Black experience. In her discussion of Black artists Michael Ray Charles and Jacob Lawrence, Sherri noted how they explored identity in different ways, yet both worked to dismantle the dominant tropes perpetuated in society:

> Whereas Jacob Lawrence is really positive and combating stereotypes, Michael Ray Charles is really taking that on. And, he's unafraid to deal with like the coon imagery. The Sandman imagery. And to think about the ways in which those stereotypes continue to live on in a very, maybe like a different sort of visual state. Or it's still very much alive today. So those are two artists that if you place them side by side, um, approach Black identity in very different ways. However, they're both legit. And they're both helpful tools to getting at a history and a lived experience.

Because Sherri's graduate program was not necessarily related to Black racial politics, her connection to activism during college was not initially as strong as she desired. However, she was later able to connect some of her experiences to what she described as the "umbrella" of activism:

> Um, yeah. I was telling [my friend], yeah, I don't really do protesting (laughs)…. I began to think well, could be giving tours [at the art gallery] be a form of protest? …. So, part of me is just grappling with, like, do I engage in activism in a way, like? I don't know. Is activism and protest the same thing?

Sherri's involvement in the art galleries on her campus gave her an opportunity not only to learn but to also "test the waters" as an activist in the world of art. Her response exhibited how, for many of the women, seeing and observing activist efforts was an integral part of the beginning phases of their activism. However, in some cases, constant exposure proved to be a factor that initially discouraged their engagement.

As a Black woman attending an all-women's HBCU, activism discussions were a source of "nostalgia" for Nicole. The reason being was the historical participation of women attending the university in the desegregation efforts of lunch counters in the South. She revealed, however, "I wasn't necessarily interested in activism. I think I was doing activist work, but I didn't call it that. I just was like, I'm doing it, and that's what it is or whatever." While activism was "something that was spoon fed to us… from orientation", Nicole noted, "we were not encouraged to be activist." She further recounted, "I'm around all these great Black women, what do I have to complain about?

But there were things to complain about. And I just kind of like, took it for granted that as a student I wouldn't be able to make any significant change." Nicole would, however, later "test the waters" by using her sphere of influence, social media, as a platform to begin voicing her opinions on various social issues. In thinking back to her days as editor in chief of the university magazine she expressed:

> I think even back then, I viewed media as a powerful tool. Umm, without even having the language… I always knew that media was important. And I knew that like once we made the magazine, it's there. You can't change it. And so, I think that was the motivation for me. It's like, we have this platform. Umm, and at the time, [our institution] was like becoming really popular. And so like, our magazine, like won some national awards and stuff like that. So, it's like we have this platform. How are we gonna use it?

The magazine served as a space for Nicole of the HBCU to discuss topics such as gender and sexuality, among others, and gave her the opportunity to "put my stamp on it" in the process.

Observing activism and testing the waters was a phase in which the participants were able to observe and learn from others who had more experience in activism. They also started to figure out low-risk ways that they themselves could become involved in resistance work. Once the participants became more self-assured in taking stances on issues personal to them, they then entered into a new phase of full-fledged activism.

Finding # 4: Phase Four - Performing Activism

The performance of activism, or the enactment of their visions for change, was a phase the participants arrived at for varying reasons. Their engagement in activism involved both individual efforts as well as collective endeavors and manifested in various forms. A motivating factor in their resistance efforts was often their desire to create change within communities to which they were personally connected. Activism for the

participants ranged from physical protests to what several alluded to as "having a seat at the table" or "working within the system."

Individual activism. Several of the participants worked in their individual capacities to enact change by using their personal influence to address complicated situations. Mary chose to challenge problematic norms within her professional environment. After hearing two Black students speak on a university panel about their experiences in college, she was personally disturbed: "They're sharing these wonderful things, and they're such like, leaders and examples of like, this is what a great student is. But like, they don't feel like they belong here because of the color of their skin." In her position as university recruiter, Mary began to pose questions to her colleagues regarding how she should approach her work: "So, like, what do you want me to tell them about how they're gonna feel on campus?" Her coworkers, she expressed, reacted like "deer in the headlights." She continued to explain,

> I think people weren't used to being pushed that way. I think people would prefer to just focus on the positive and not focus on the difficult things. Umm, and that's just kind of been my activism. It's getting in the space and getting people to think about, what are you talking about. Umm, and it's certainly been that way at the [professional] school. Because I think even more so there is a tendency to not want to talk about things. And to kind of ignore history, which is ridiculous.

Mary was not content with her colleagues' failure to acknowledge the difficulties of being a student of color in their recruitment processes. Her activism entailed using her positionality to engage others in challenging dialogues, skills she utilized in educational settings. As the women grew in their activism, they felt a greater sense of personal responsibility to educate their youth in their communities so that they too could advocate for change.

For Melissa, her role as an activist post-college coincided with her role as an educator. She recalled "much of like, that period post-college, was just really developing

my, my sense of how I wanted to impact my students as an educator…Some people might not call that activism. I think it is." Teaching her students their "rich histories" was one way she empowered them. Being an instructor also allowed her to "transfer… not only the knowledge that [she] had, but also [provide] access to where [her students] can…find information." Activism in the educational sphere was a prominent method of change for all the participants. Individually, the women created change through action in many spaces for a variety of reasons. They likewise worked with others in several ways to accomplish their goals.

Collective activism. Activism within the collective was also an area in which the participants were able to create synergy to enact their visions for change. Harper, for example, indicated that her peers served as sources of encouragement for her efforts. Having other Black women who could see "eye-to-eye" with her helped her feel she was never alone:

> In high school, it was my friend Jamie, who helped coordinate…. all the events that we did. Umm, and then in college when I did the umm, got the snacks for the kids [in an after-school program] it was another friend of mine, Audrey who was volunteering with me and we were like yeah, let's do it. And [we] could, just kind of push each other to that point of, yeah let's do something and here's what we're gonna do. And let's do it together. Umm, and so having someone else to lighten the load was definitely helpful.

Having someone else to help ease the pressures associated with activism was valuable for Harper. The opportunity to interact with another individual when strategizing was an added benefit of collaborating with others.

Jasmine and her network of like-minded peers worked together in their neighborhood to transform the culture of violence against people of color. As a senior in college, she found herself at ground zero, engaged in the community struggle against police brutality in an area near her college town. Jasmine noted her experiences in the

city, rapidly propelled her into a sense of urgency that necessitated her full engagement in activism:

> I mean I felt I didn't have a choice. Most of the Black students who I knew at [my university] felt as if they didn't have a choice. It didn't matter [that] we went to [my university]. It didn't matter that we were privileged. It didn't matter, that like, we literally sat in these like beautiful, ornate, gorgeous, classrooms with… nice manicured lawns. It did not matter. Like this is a fight that is beyond privilege…. we felt like as much as Wash maybe didn't or did explicitly contribute to some of the inequities in St. Louis, we recognized that it perpetuated them.

Jasmine and her peers had begun to understand the privilege they held as students on campus, and as such the implications of possessing such power. As Jasmine and the other participants began to recognize the level of influence they possessed, many of them chose to use their talents in ways that affected others who shared similar identities to them.

Activism for specific populations. Activism for specific communities was important to the participants, as many of them focused their work on sub-populations to which they had a personal connection. According to Sasha, activism was not a "completely solo event." Therefore, an individual had to have a purpose when participating in a movement, and they had to know who they were representing:

> You hear people [say] like, oh I'm here to be an activist for the Black community. I'm here to be an activist for like, you know, like, queer communities. I'm here to be an activist for like, you know feminist like communities. Like, it's kind of like, you have someone that you, like, you have a group of people you like, associate yourself with. And you're wanting to like, advocate for them, and like, speak for them, and help them build themselves up. And work with them.

Sasha's comments highlighted the necessity of an individual knowing the purpose behind their work as an activist. Michelle confirmed Sasha's response concerning activism for specific communities, but spoke on the topic using a different lens:

> There's also people… who are activists for one thing and not for others. So, like they, maybe you're pro Black Lives Matter. But, are you pro Black woman? Like, you know? Like, oh you're pro Black Lives Matters, but do you support Black gay

> men? Like, so, yeah. I think people, people pick and choose what they want to be activist about or for.

Michelle was able to recognize that effective advocacy meant being able to critically understand the intersectional identities of others.

Breanna's work with queer and trans people of color demonstrated the need for intersectional activism. After attending a holiday fair for queer and trans individuals in their area, Breanna realized the event was not very inclusive of people of color. As a result, Breanna organized their own fair that would cater to a broader group:

> And I found somebody to like, co-organize it with me. And we got like ten vendors…. Like people of color. Queer and trans people of color. And we got a space. It was really cute. I mean like, [we] had a little swag swap. So, people would like swap clothes. We had a little secret snowflake. We played music. We had snacks. Umm, and yeah, we had a little holiday fair thing.

Breanna was able to discern early on that having a relationship with a particular group did not always mean an individual would be welcomed. The troubling dynamics of race that surfaced within predominately White queer and trans spaces, therefore, prompted Breanna to establish an organization where people would feel fully accepted.

Being an activist for particular communities was common, as all of the participants gravitated to causes aligned to their personal values and beliefs. Having clear intentions in their work generally contributed to a clear vision and plan of action. As illustrated, the participants' performance of activism was multifaceted and involved individual, collective, and community-focused forms of engagement. Because of their high commitment to their work, the participants eventually faced periods of burnout.

Finding # 5: Phase Five – Burnout and Introspection

During the burnout and introspection phase the participants went through periods of exhaustion related to their activism. Moments of introspection enabled them to

understand the value of self-preservation. Breanna, for example, discussed the consequences of being a Black student activist in a predominately White environment. The unwillingness of professors to acknowledge how they reinforced White supremacy within their classroom was frustrating for Breanna. Rectifying the problematic relationship between race and power in their courses however was demanding:

> I also just have been yelling at everyone in my um, program (laughs)…. I'm just constantly yelling at people... Like this year I've been trying to distance myself, so- Even like, today in class I'm sitting there like, I'm just not even, I just can't listen to what you're saying because it's just gon' make me mad… I'm getting to the point where it's like I'm- I'm engaging in this for self-preservation, and I'm able to draw the line easier than I was before.

Self-care were not only crucial for Breanna in the educational environment, but it also became a necessary component of Kai's life.

For Kai, demands from school, family, and her own desire to make change converged, leaving her emotionally and physically vulnerable:

> Before, I was taking on everything, anything that was a challenge to me. I was like let's go (laughs)! I was, and I would be burnt out. Like I would be so burnt out…. but once I entered into this program, I guess I got tired. And then I had issues going on with my mom's like diabetes taking over. Her almost dying, like, and then me being sick because I'm not eating and taking care of myself 'cause I'm taking care of literally everybody else. So, yeah. Yeah. That was the moment things started to change. And like instead of doing something, I did nothing. Um, and because of that I'm like, I'll never do this silence thing ever again. But I will do it [activism] wisely because I don't wanna kill myself in the process.

Both Breanna and Kai discovered there are limitations to their activist engagement and adjusted their actions accordingly as a means of maintaining their mental and physical wellness. Kai additionally learned that although being selfless was essential part of her identity, "prioritizing self-preservation is what keeps me going. I think I said before, like, I'm not gonna, light myself on fire to keep other people warm." Though self-care became a priority for the women, activism was still an integral component of their lives. Sherri

affirmed this when she expressed, activism was “not something you can like, just, say, you’re not a part of …. You can always, you know, take those breaks, but you can’t fully like, you shouldn’t remove yourself completely, ‘cause it’s a never-ending type of work.”

Introspection. Taking the time to process their experiences also helped the participants to become privy other things. Their reflection on their own personal struggles helped them understand that there was a relationship between privilege and activism. Nneka’s observations of others’ involvement in resistance movements led her to argue, "It’s a privilege to protest… and that’s really messed up…. I’ve met some Black female activists, and they’re amazing. I’m always in like, awe of them, you know.” She went on to suggest these activists were “sacrificing so much more than anyone else here [at the institution] … So, I just have so much respect for them." Nneka, also realized the power that she held being a professional student at her university. She explained, “I think recognizing the amount of power I have as a law student, and the more power I’ll have as a lawyer has made me even more interested in activism than I was before." Nneka's realization motivated her to use her power for good measure.

Harper made similar remarks concerning privilege when she stated, “it’s absolutely recognizing privilege…education is a privilege. And I… almost cringe saying that because my personal belief is that education is a right. But the truth is that there are people that don’t have access to a graduate education." She continued to say, "I think it’s just- the activism has made me aware of the privilege it is to be a student. And also, just makes me keep my priorities in order and, makes me think about… not being so self-oriented.” Harper then asserted, “it’s my responsibility as a Black student… not just to recognize it, but to use my privilege to help others as much as I can.” Providing others with the opportunity to advance and grow was for Harper an intentional act of keeping connected to the reality of others in her community. Grappling with privilege was

beneficial for many of the women, yet, what the women found was, not everyone noticed their entitlement so readily.

Unlike the other participants, Mary alluded to the fact that her peers were conversely, oblivious to privilege, which was in her opinion, problematic. She noted, “for [professional] students… like, you’re incredibly privileged to go to [this] school… And then to have the power that you’re gonna have once you graduate to… practice and shape [societal policies], and influence people's lives." The prospect of her cohort members obtaining careers in her field of practice was, therefore, "terrifying…. Like, this is horrible!... I'm like, are we just not gonna talk about this?"

The advantages of a being a graduate student was something the participants did not take for granted. Neither was their ability to engage in activism something they considered a given; the privilege of activism itself was also evident to them. The burnout and introspection phase allowed the participants to critically challenge their former presumptions about activism so that they could form new conceptual frameworks. They also reframed what was important to them concerning their visions for enacting change. It then appeared that the participants were able to shift into the next phase of reconciliation and expanded activist perspectives.

Finding # 6: Phase Six - Reconciliation and Expanded Perspectives

A process of reconciliation between the model idea of activism the participants aspired to, and the reasonableness of such work was an integral part of their growth. Harper, for example, was able to reconcile the fact that as a graduate student she was not as engaged as she wanted to be. However, she could use the resources she had a graduate student to help others gain access to the same opportunities she had:

> I see it as like, a lifetime journey, so if I'm not able to be out and volunteering as much right now as a graduate student as I possibly want to, then I feel that I can make up for that when I'm done.

Mary also made peace with the reality that she could continue her efforts in the same manner as she had in the past. Because of her expanded perspectives on activism, she became more strategic in her endeavors and contemplated "how can I create infrastructure so that students can do whatever it is that [they] decide [they] want to do?" Mary decided to recruit others to become involved in her organizations. She then became a mentor to her first-year peers and let others assume her former leadership role. Her activist engagement then took on a different form:

> Now I sit on different committee for faculty appointments. And so, I get to recommend who they should be interviewing. And I'm only picking people of color (laughs). Only people, critical race theorist. And I'm like, you need to hire a critical race theorist…Like, what are you gonna do? What are you gonna do? (Laughs) So umm, I think my activism has just been more about, at least in the [professional] school setting, has been more about how can I create institutional change? And, put things in place so that students aren't kind of lost at sea hopefully.

Mary's decision to pass the leadership torch to her peers gave Mary the time and energy to influence other important areas. She shifted her grassroots student organizational perspective to one that focused on change at the institutional level through hiring and policy.

During Nicole's involvement in an empowerment program for Black girls, she noticed the tensions between her values and the respectability politics embedded within the program:

> Like how do you teach these young girls to grow up to be, empowered, but respectable young Black women? And as I look back on it now, I kind of wish that I could do it all over again. Like, with the knowledge I have now, I wish I could have done it over again, because I think that the respectable part played a huge role into like, the things that we did.

Although Nicole appreciated the value of the program, she felt there should have been less focus on the dos and don'ts of being a young woman, and more on "developing critical thinking. And like, allowing them to think for themselves." She continued to say, "empowering is like a very loaded word, because that implies that like I have something to give to you that you wouldn't have without me. And I don't think that that's fair." However, she noted, "we don't listen to them as much. And Black girls. We don't listen to them. It's more so just like, don't get pregnant. Don't be fast. Do this. Don't do that. And that's all wrapped up in respectability." Because of her expanded perspective, Nicole now understood that providing resources for the girls to live the best life possible despite their mistakes was more empowering than "finger-wagging" or being judgmental. Not only did the participants notice changes in their views on how activism could be performed, but they also observed how the conceptions of their peers evolved over time.

After spending their senior year engaged in the struggle against police brutality, Jasmine's classmates decided to stay in the city near their university. The location, was however, a place they once desired to escape:

> And there were quite few who were like, no. Let's find an apartment, and let's fight. Some of them are still there, which I think is really interesting. 'Cause you don't typically think about… students, in particular in St. Louis, um, staying. Staying and fighting for that. You think about them staying and trying to develop the city. Staying to try to like, almost exploit the city. But no, they stayed for that. And they made the decision senior year, just to stay. That they could use, they could leverage what they had gotten from the university, and flip their privilege to like, affect change, which I really respect. And I really like, appreciate.

The reconciliation and expanded perspectives phase was a period in which the participants' conceptions of activism became more abstract. For some, preparing others to take on leadership roles became a valid form of resistance. For others, generating change now meant influencing their professional or academic institutions. The

participants' advocacy and desire for change was indispensable, and they often gained small victories for their work. The path to accomplishing their goals was, however, not without obstacles.

Finding # 7: Activism Came with Challenges and Consequences

Participating in activism presented several challenges and sometimes consequences for the participants. Michelle conveyed this best when she stated: "It's not gonna be like, peaches and roses. You're not gonna, you know, be trending on Twitter all the time." Issues such as such as interacting with difficult people and navigating spaces that were highly political were commonplace for the participants. In some instances, personal competing interests made becoming involved even more complicated. The participants also identified issues related to attitudes of division, separatism, and judgment as stumbling blocks they as well as other activists had to overcome.

Institutional and political challenges. Acquiescing to the demands or policies of institutional administrators was an issue that the participants encountered. Nicole, for example, recalled the resistance her peers faced in their attempts to change campus policies:

> I remember a group of students that were anonymous, that wrote a letter and like they protested. And they did all kinds of different things. Now, our administration shut them down. They were like, you don't need to do this. Like we have way bigger problems than, the [cafeteria] food, or um, resources of the school, or whatever. Like, shutting down any type of activism. And I wasn't a part of it, and I was like, I kind of agree with the administration. It's not that big of a deal. And I was like whatever. So, at that HBCU, I did not view activism as something that was important to me.

Nicole's initial disinterest in activism led her to side with the administrations choice to quickly dissolve student activist activity. She, nevertheless, began to develop her voice of resistance while serving as editor in chief of the campus magazine. When she decided to

include an article about being gay at her institution, a “very traditional [Black] southern place,” it was then that she realized how troublesome the administration could be. For Nicole, their opposition *was not* acceptable:

> So, to even admit that there are gay students at [my undergraduate institution] was like, a no, no. So, we got so much flack for that article. Like, they were like, y’all need to take this out of that magazine. And we were like no. Like, one, y’all really gonna act like this doesn’t exist at [institution]? But two, no. Like we’re not gonna do that.

Nicole responded to the organizational politics by standing her ground, even to their dismay. But, managing campus politics was not always so straightforward.

Harper believed some of the most significant challenges in activism were managing campus politics and your reputation simultaneously. She considered the two areas "neck and neck" in importance. Harper explained, "I have conversations all the time with others, especially young Black professionals, about how do you manage … succeeding where you're at and navigating those politics and speaking your truth? Because there are certain times… when they conflict." Harper asserted there was a tension in navigating politics and also making "sure that you [were] creating an opportunity to be successful down the road." The women, as well as their peers, also grappled with managing competing interests.

Competing interests. The political risks associated with speaking out or advocating for a personal cause elicited a sense of internal conflict, especially for people of color who at times, had to choose between resisting or surviving. Mary realized this quickly after one of her own cohort members stifled her plans to engage in a solidarity movement. When a racist incident occurred within a fraternity at another university, Mary decided to make signs, and take a picture showing the solidarity of the professional students who opposed the disturbing and hateful behavior of the fraternal organization:

> And there was another kid who was in my class, this Black student. My arch nemesis (laughs). And he, umm, I ran into him when he was talking to another Black student. And, [he] was talking that student out of taking the picture. And, um, I was like well why? Like, why? Why? And his reasoning was that he didn't want employers to see this picture and think that that was too radical for him to be associated with that kind of talk or those issues…. he was like, 'oh I'll take the picture for you. But I don't wanna be tagged in it. I don't want my face in it. I don't want to be publicly associated with it.' And like, he actively like, went around and convinced other students… not to participate. And not to be involved.

Mary believed that any employer who rejected a person because they stood in solidarity for a cause was not worth working for, yet she acknowledged her privilege in the scenario. As a person raised in a middle-class household, the financial and family obligations others might encounter after completing school may differ from her circumstances in some same ways. Mary went on to suggest the risk of losing a job for being too "radical" discouraged the activism of Black students in her field as a whole:

> I think that's the other piece that stops students of color, particularly Black students now, from being more outspoken. Is, that if they decided to go that route, the firm route, they're much more guarded…. They're much more ok with, quote, unquote, being co-opted. And like, put up on their diversity pages, because they know that's the box that they're checking and that's what they're there to do. They're not there to encourage conversation…. they're not really about activism if it means sacrificing their livelihood.

Race and class intersected in ways that were consequential for students of color. They, perhaps, wanted to engage in activism at times but felt they could not because of their position. The pressures of a corporate society that was not committed to creating or maintaining inclusion for people of color further exacerbated the problem. According to the participants, the tensions between survival and resistance were not the only barrier Black activists experienced. Division caused by philosophical differences were another impediment to the progression of struggles against inequity.

Division, Separatism, and Judgment. Unity and togetherness, according to the participants, were not always apparent within the Black community. They acknowledged

that differences in opinions were a natural part of any group, but divergent perspectives on activism sometimes produced unhealthy rifts. Two of the cases presented by the participants involved debates regarding “old school versus new school” activism. Sherri illustrated this idea best when she stated:

> I think there’s also this comparison between this millennial age of protesting versus this kind of old school age of protesting. Where you think about the Selma Montgomery marches. Where you think about the Black Panthers. Um, there's always this comparison between, ok what activism are we doing now, versus what activism was done in the past.

Sherri's framework for activism centered around how older generations performed activism. She expressed how those who participated in movements in the past might possibly cast judgment on activists today: "So, like an older generation… [might say] well in my day and age we were really out in the streets…. we were at the voting polls, and we did this, and we did that…. what are y’all doing today?"

Sherri suggested older generations felt the social media age of protest as "weak" and ineffective. She explained, "It’s the shaming of millennials. Like, well we do this too tame. But then I feel like when people do hold very kind of, ‘fierce' protests, like, out in the streets, [they say] ‘Oh. Y'all are too disruptive.” The disparate ideas were baffling to Sherri who questioned, “So, what is it? Are we too like, weak (laughs)? Are we too much?” Sherri’s comments illustrated how versions of activism that deviated from set expectations and norms were either validated or invalidated. An unwillingness to help each other was also an issue some of the women identified as an issue within the Black activist community.

Kai suggested the "crabs in a barrel mentality," or desire to pull others down was problematic when trying to accomplish equity related goals in the community. She

expressed that people could achieve more if they connected on a human level, and had an attitude of selflessness versus selfishness:

> It's like we're competing for the little slots that the man (laughs) has allotted for us Black people to, you know, fulfill. And I ain't with that…. each one, reach one is kinda my mantra, and how I'm affecting change. But also like, lifting as I climb. And reaching in both directions of success, both up and down, and across. Umm, it's kinda what is keeping me grounded in not perpetuating that separatism in the Black community. I'm not competing for shit (laughs). Um, and if I'm winning at the expense of someone else's loss, that's supposed to be my people, then I'm not winning at all.

Once again, the importance of selflessness emerged as an essential component of activism for the participants. The work of creating a better society required everyone, and the contributions of all were necessary no matter what form they took. Performing activism was not always easy as the participants faced a variety of hardships. In spite of the barriers, the women used their experiences to redefine how they approached their work, so they could produce greater outcomes for the future.

The findings presented for research question two exemplified the intricate, powerful, and profound ways in which the participants described their activism experiences. The first set findings (one through six), explained how the phases the participants progressed through as they developed their current conceptions of activism and formed their own signature style of activism. The last finding of this section illuminated the challenges they faced while performing activism in various ways. The next section will focus on the factors that influenced their involvement in activism.

RESEARCH QUESTION THREE: FACTORS THAT INFLUENCED THEIR ACTIVISM

Research question three explored the factors that influenced the participants' activism, including their levels of engagement and their preferred methods for change. Personal attributes such as their personality, as well as their individual values and beliefs

often shaped how the women approached their work. Leaders, personal mentors, family, peers, and colleagues served as another source of influence for their activism. These individuals, according to the participants, were role models that inspired how they thought about and performed activism. Social media also affected the women's perceptions of activism as well as their use of online platforms for organizing. The subsequent sections discuss, in detail the following findings: 1) personal characteristics shaped their activism, 2) the influence of others shaped their activism, and 3) social media influenced their activism.

Finding # 1: Personal Characteristics Shaped their Activism

Various facets of the participants' identities either encouraged or discouraged their willingness to undertake specific forms of activism. The characteristics presented in this finding provide only a small snapshot of full list of personal traits that shaped their engagement. Yet, the few that were chosen are representative of the ways in which Black women have historically approached their activism (Collins, 2009).

Behind the scenes. On account of patriarchal ideologies within the Black community, Black women were often precluded from taking formal leadership roles within past struggles for Black liberation (Collins, 2009). Positive changes in society have, however, given Black women in contemporary movements the opportunity to choose their preferred methods of resistance. Overall, many of the participants in this study felt more comfortable in less conspicuous, yet highly influential roles. Nneka's comments served as a great summation of their collective responses: "I'm not like, saying I'm like a shy, quiet person… if I had to choose what'd be like, my role in Hollywood… I would choose like producer or director. I'm not gonna choose to be the actress." Nneka was more interested in avoiding the limelight, as she stated, "my definition of activism

ties, I think, very neatly to my general desire to be behind the scenes of what's going on, ‘cause I just think it's a little bit more fun and more complex." Because of personal characteristics, Nneka was fond of less overt forms of activism. Nicole similarly favored activities that were more covert and free from physical harm because of her responsibility as a parent.

Parenthood. Black women also used their influence as mothers within the home and in the community to affect change (Collins, 2009). The same sentiments remained true for the Nicole also. Becoming the parent of a Black son at the pinnacle of the Black Lives Matter significantly affected how Nicole thought about activism. She acknowledged, "I have no idea how you parent freely, but it's like parenting impacted different theories I was learning too. Like, all of the things are connected ‘cause I'm learning about class. I'm learning about gender. I'm learning about race." All these areas combined, Nicole asserted, impacted how she parented. Because she was the only Black mom in many of the "mommy spaces" for women who were breastfeeding she considered becoming a counselor. However, she noticed how the parenting groups were "racist as hell. And like, [were] implicit in it." She recalled thinking, "I don't wanna be a part of this. And also, I think I was being recruited as like the token counselor, and I was like, no. Hell no.” Nicole alternatively chose to host story time for kids at the gym. During storytelling time, Nicole would choose books that had diverse characters. She believed books had the power to “transform minds,” especially if you could expose children at a young age to different cultures.

Spirituality. The church was a prominent organization in which Black women used their informal authority to strengthen their communities (Collins, 2009). These institutions were also places where “othermothers” provided guidance to younger generations as they planned and organized movements. Likewise, Kai and Grace received

expressed how their involvement in religious organizations influenced their conceptualizations activism and methods of engagement. Growing up in the church exposed Kai to a support system that cultivated her personal identity. The church contributed to her to be "fearless, even though the situations I find myself in can evoke fear. But it doesn't consume me to the point of immobility anymore." This ability to act, in spite of unfavorable circumstances later bolstered Kai's activism and the outcomes she achieved because of her work. In circumstances where she would normally remain silent, she instead used her confidence to speak out against the unfair situations.

Grace, being a very spiritual person, felt "as a Christian, I believe everyone, should like, be treated fairly and be treated right. And like, be loved on, right?" Grace's faith also motivated her to spread the love of Christ and the message of fairness to others through bible studies in the community, which how she engaged in activism. Personal traits, beliefs and values all determined why and how the participants chose to transform their communities. Another common reason for their continued work was their personal desire for change.

A personal desire for change. As Mary became more involved in her professional career, she noticed the vast differences between her background and those of the students she recruited. Thinking back on that time in her life, she noted, "I think the reason I care about communities of color, community's empowerment is because I- I don't think that my upbringing is the norm….and that's not ok…. like that's not normal." The fact that "a healthy home life" and access to a "great public school" was not common for Black women was "not ok." Mary explained, "like that's the motivation behind… why I'm engaged in trying to uplift communities and to empower them." She wanted to expand the opportunities Black women had and to change their situations so that they could experience different outcomes. Accomplishing these goals was not always easy,

but it was worth it for some of the participants if it meant the existence of an equitable society.

Sasha further alluded to change as a motivating factor for her activism in the field of education: "If you keep on pushing, pushing, you'll get this like, eventual change." She suggested that although her goal of creating more research on Black women in the academy was very tangible, it would take time to make it a reality. However, she still wanted to make an impact on post-secondary institutions:

> As a Black woman, I think activism is just existing. And so existing in like White spaces, like the academy, is really important for like other little Black girls who are interested in doing research to see me and me and be like, if she can do it, I can do it, you know. And I like, you know, that's what really like inspired me.

Sasha wanted to see more representation of Black women faculty and administrators on campus. Doing so would promote a sense of belonging for other Black women students and also increase the number and mentors available to them. Seeing the aftermath of this was significant for Sasha as she understood how the presence of role models shaped her activism.

Finding # 2: The Influence of Others Shaped their Activism

The participants were frequently surrounded by or exposed to people who they considered leaders or role models who helped to progress the Black community. Some of the individuals the participants discussed were more well-known activists. Other participants described how personal accounts of activism from family members or the support of their peers influenced their activism. Michelle and Barack Obama's professional careers were, for example, very inspirational to Harper:

> I think they are the epitome of what I would aspire to be as far as activism because they have literally crushed or broken ceilings, you know. Glass ceilings, and whatever ceiling has been on Black people, umm to get to the highest office

> in the land. And, I love the way that they did it…. And I think that in order to become the president of the United States and first lady, you have to do some kind of element of like, gaming the system. And like, and also working within the system to get to that level if that makes sense. And that's the model that I typically ascribe to. Of like, knowing when to like, go against the system and knowing when to go with the system. And so, yeah. All of those things make her and her husband, but particularly her a great role model for how I would like to be viewed as an activist.

The former President and First Lady exemplified the poise, grace, and strategic thinking that Harper aspired to in her activism. Their knowledge and prowess intrigued Harper who desired to attain a similar level of competency in both navigating and dismantling systems of oppression. The work of famous individuals similarly made an impression on Sherri.

Sherri's mission in the art world was to provide others with the same opportunity she had to be in spaces that sparked critical conversations about Blackness. While discussing the artist Jacob Lawrence, she explained many people did not know of his work, which was problematic:

> I find that really disheartening, especially when you consider that we have a lot of emerging Black artists coming up. And like who know about them. You know if people don't know about Jacob Lawrence - who's been established in his career since the 1930s, and has been celebrated since the 1930s - like, who's gonna know Maria Magdalena Campos Pons? (laughs). And the next show that we have coming in this space. So, I think working here [art gallery] just makes me wanna get the name of these people out more. To get the names of these artists out more. And to see like, hey, come to this gallery, not only to help and support us. But to learn about these people. And to learn about the different ways that artists have, kind of translated their experience into an experience of like the African Diaspora and that that's not just one story.

Education through art was a top priority for Sherri, who had aspired to change the culture of the art world. There were a multitude of Black artists that influenced her through their work. She wanted others to experience the compelling, disruptive narratives they conveyed in their paintings. Some of the participants had role models that influenced

them from afar, but all of them had more intimate connections to people in their lives who provided them with, guidance, support and also a sense of community.

The participants also had a group of close family members, friends, peers, and other individuals who shaped their activism. Nneka reflected on how her parent's immigrant status affected her initial relationship to activism:

> There was just a lot of paths that allowed my parents to stay and become citizens, despite overstaying their visa. So at least for my family- I'm sure this is the same for many immigrant families- there's this sense of gratitude to your new nation. And so, if the emphasis is always on like, assimilating to this nation, and uphold[ing] their rule of law, it's never like- my parents would never think to talk about activism. What does that even mean? You know? …. it's not something I grew up in. It was always just felt like, how can you follow the rule the best you can.

Having undocumented parents, Nneka was not exposed to a culture of resistance within her home. Her experiences, however, did not deter her from being involved in change efforts later in life. Nneka's past, nonetheless, may have influenced her preference for less noticeable forms of activism.

Melissa also grew up in a home with undocumented parents. She explained, "My parents were never really activists. They weren't, they were just kind of like, 'we're undocumented. We don't have papers. We need to stay on the hush. Let's stay, make sure we do what we need to do." The goal for them was to stay out of trouble until they could obtain their formal documentation. For this reason, Melissa expressed, "I really, really appreciate a lot of undocumented people who are really out there being active in their communities. I think that's powerful. And that's not to say I blame my parents for anything. I understand both sides." Nneka and Melissa's families gave them a firsthand glimpse into the hardships that undocumented individuals faced. As result of their experiences, they developed greater sense of gratitude for undocumented activists.

The narratives Michelle's family members passed down from generation to generation inspired her to action. From these stories, Michelle learned that her grandfather was once a slave who obtained his freedom:

> So, it was like, alright…. We'll let you just go, or whatnot. But you know, if you get caught… we can't save you…. just hearing their stories about like, him, and his life, or whatnot. And then, you know seeing, like, my mom and my aunts and them, go through like integration... I'm just like, whew! Wow, you know? So, like, I think having like, that close connection influences it [activism].

Family members were not the only people in the participants' lives that directly influenced their activist work. Their peers, faculty, and others in their networks also supported them in ways that renewed their energy and reinforced their commitment to transforming their environments.

Kai expressed being very grateful for a "strong advisor" who she noted, "saved my life." While in her master's program, Kai encountered a professor, who was not so fond of the color of her skin. The faculty member was often resistance to provide Kai assistance and gave unfair evaluations of her class assignments. When she went to her advisor, Kai expressed, he offered useful advice:

> I hear what you're going through, but we need to turn this struggle into scholarship. Turn this struggle into strength. And you know they whooped my ass. (Kai laughs) And I was here in the 60s, right? Doing the same stuff. But you see how I've been able to get through?

Kai continued to explain how her advisor suggested she use unfair systems as mechanisms to overcome. Kai's advisor turned her trials into teachable moments and gave her skills and knowledge to navigate other challenging situations. Sometimes, just surrounding themselves with other like-minded people restored the participants' dedication to their agendas for change.

Sasha felt rejuvenated when she was able to connect with other Black women in her field or just others who were fighting for equity: "I think like, it's good meeting like-minded people who like, who are down for the cause. Who actually want to see the progression of society. Who actually know how to like, you know, speak to like senators, and legislators." Finding allies who could affect policies, or sit at certain tables was important to Sasha, as they were able to advance discussions on critical issues.

Finding a community with others also proved to be a source of empowerment for some of the participants. Breanna expressed that their involvement in the online communities of queer and transgender persons helped connect them to different causes. They explained, "getting like tapped into that community, I think I felt that I started to like, understand even more … [that] this [work] all counts." Breanna also suggested online communities allowed individuals them to be "more present" in contemporary movements. The internet for Breanna created ways to interact with others that may not have existed in other spaces. Having these networks was necessary their well-being. Social media applications also influenced the women's activism in different ways.

Finding # 3: Social Media as a Tool Influenced their Activism

The value of social media activism was a topic that emerged several times during the participants' discussions, which was anticipated considering the substantial use of digital technology today. Most of the participants felt social media was a valid form of activism and that an online presence could affect change. Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter were all outlets the participants had at some point utilized to obtain or disseminate information related to their communities.

Mary's encounter with a YouTube video featuring activist and hip-hip artist Sister Souljah and political activist Cornell West exposed her to an engaging conversation that incited her to action. Reflecting on the video, which was a panel about race, she recalled:

> It's a great video. It's super old. It's like very like 1992. She's got like a side ponytail. She's wearing like a baggy leather jacket. Like, it's, it's great…. She goes through this whole analysis of like, basically when she got woke. And it was like, 'The person that helped me was this teacher who told me the truth. Who told me like these are who your enemies are…. Like, family, friends, like love you. But you didn't help me at all. You're all a part of a system. And you're living within these conditions….' I just remember that part. She was like, 'he taught me who my enemies were.'

Other parts of the video also resonated with Mary, who identified with Sister Souljah's perspectives on being Black. Access to social media created a point of entry for Mary to learn about her own identity and the things that did not make sense regarding the world around her. Using online channels to gather information about a topic was one way in which the participants were equipped to perform activism. However, utilizing popular media as a form of activism, was not always considered acceptable.

The participants used the term "slacktivism" several times to describe how others sometimes felt about online organizing and movements. Although Breanna felt the internet was a powerful platform, they admitted some naysayers disagreed with them. When defining slacktivism, they stated:

> My general understanding and definition is…. The idea that people are sitting back in their chairs and just typing on the internet. I consider that to be activism…. Like people consider people tweeting, or people sharing Facebook statuses or petitions, or I don't know if you would count donating online as armchair activism. But the idea that people are sitting behind their computers not doing something real. Um, which does happen (laughs)…. But I think that it's, it's used to diminish the work and labor of people who can only do work that way. Which includes people who are disabled. People who can't go outside for whatever reason. And then even just like specific communities where it's like- Or just like, you know, people are it's hard to find community.

The reactions of others to social media engagement did, however, make Breanna take pause and reflect on the implications that came with invalidating this form of work. The negation of online spaces revealed issues of classism and privilege in activism. Though there were negative connotations associated with online activism, they did not deter Breanna from using the platform. Nicole, like Breanna, also agreed that social media was essential to the progression of movements, despite dissenting opinions.

Nicole, who developed a deep interest in the digital realm early on, stated “one of the major things that has influenced my activism has been the internet and social media…. some people… [say], ‘oh that’s slacktivism…. you can’t do real work on the internet… which I don’t think is true at all.” Nicole went on to explain, “I think you can do a lot of work on the internet. And obviously, that has been happening. Umm, and, as the internet and social media has grown, it becomes a lot more political." As Nicole grew more comfortable posting things on the internet, she expressed doing so "became another extension of [her] activism." She further professed that "without the internet, I don’t think I would have been as socially conscious as I am now.” Despite the positive influences that online engagement had on the women’s activism, there were times when they tempered their social media presence because of their professional positions.

Michelle worked in a position where her supervisor was well-known on campus. Because of this, Michelle became very conscious of the consequences she could face for personal opinions she posted on her accounts. She explained, "Like every day now I’m definitely like, more aware of when I post things on Twitter. And so, like I scrubbed my Twitter. And now I scrubbed it, and I'm like, I wanna post this so bad." Michelle now chose to moderate the character she presented online because, in her opinion, more could be accomplished through the power of her office than through her alone.

Several factors influenced the participants' activism, whether it be their perspectives on the subject or their engagement in resistance efforts. Personal attributes the participants possessed such as their personality, beliefs, and values dictated how and why they chose to participate in specific endeavors as finding one demonstrated. Finding two illuminated how outside influences such as family, friends, peers, and others in their networks also provided support, encouragement, or valuable lessons to the participants, which inspired them and solidified their commitment to activism. Social media, as discussed in finding three, also factored into how the women conceptualized their involvement in current day movements. The participants suggested that online organizing, or "slacktivism," was given a bad reputation and considered to be in less esteem. However, they knew the value of digital spaces in transforming minds and creating connections. The next section will highlight how the participants' activism and student experience were influential in reciprocal ways.

RESEARCH QUESTION FOUR: ACTIVISM'S INFLUENCE ON STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Research question four explored how the participants' activism influenced their student experience. As graduate students, they focused a significant portion of their activism within educational spaces; activism and their post-secondary endeavors were interconnected and at times, inseparable. The participants described using their scholarly activism to increase the amount of research concerning Black students, faculty, and administrators in various disciplines. All of the participants alluded to the consequences of being the only, or one of few Black individuals in their degree programs. This lack of representation magnified the need for more people of color in professional university settings. However, being the "token" Black person sometimes provided them with a "seat at the table;" the participants used this opportunity to work within oppressive institutional

systems while simultaneously dismantling them. Working to improve the educational system for themselves, and those to come, was necessary, but required a sacrifice of time and energy. The next sections present the following findings from research question four: 1) activism and the student experience were interconnected and inseparable, 2) race and gender influenced their activism, 3) activism required a sacrifice of time and energy, and 4) they gained new skills and knowledge that they passed to others.

Finding # 1: Activism and the Student Experience were Interconnected and Inseparable

Educational activism was a priority for the participants, as their work in the post-secondary setting meant a better future for themselves and other Black individuals. Activism and the student experience were mutually influential with one often dictating the other. They understood that creating change in the ivory tower was essential to the progression of a broader movement for equity in institutions of learning. Their commitment to change through action grew as they journeyed from primary school through their graduate level coursework.

Sasha, for example, noticed there were fewer Black women in comparison to White within the upper levels of administrative hierarchies. For her, the opportunity to observe a Black woman in a vice president position at a flagship institution was energizing:

> I saw her, and I was like, shook. I was like, what do you mean a Black woman's ahead of this? … It made my heart happy because like, you know, going back to [my undergraduate institution], I'm like, well, all the, you know, the higher ups are all White men… You know the people that I'm working with who are Black women, they have these great roles. But you know, are they gonna move up? Are they just gonna stay in these roles?

Because of her concerns, Sasha chose to investigate Black women in the academy and how they dealt with issues of racism, sexism, and microaggressions. She was also interested in exploring how Black women who obtained degrees dealt with family or friends who considered them a "sellout" because of their advanced levels of education. Centering the experience of Black women in education was meaningful for Sasha, as she aspired to similar roles in her future.

Jasmine's expertise in history led her to engage in activism for students in a younger demographic. As a Teaching Tolerance Fellow, Jasmine worked with an organization that focused on teaching students in primary school about inequity and racial justice in the United States. She was charged with developing lesson plans that would explain the nation's complicated history to young kids in appealing and informative way. As a historian, she was adept at finding sources that were pertinent to the topic, but finding something that a kindergartener could relate to was more challenging: "How do I find an, a slave advertisement, that someone who's, you know, age eight, is gonna understand?" She explained:

> You basically curate these things into worksheets for kids. And you decide if your worksheets are for, you know, kindergarteners all the way up through 12th grade. And they're curated such that they have all kinds of like, questions that you come up with, that are all about like, what does race mean in this piece? What does gender mean in this piece? How would you understand this piece if it were published today? Do you see any commonalities between this struggle and your struggle?

Jasmine noted that the idea sounded simple but that is was actually "very radical." The project was "great example of how activism gets applied to both a really academic space, but like, not a higher ed space. Actually, a lower ed space." The lessons, which were all free for teachers, would influence the next generation of "radical," "respectable," and "engaged" citizens. The experience for Jasmine not only challenged her ability to

translate and interpret information for a very different audience, but it was also a substantial opportunity to transform the historical narratives in K-12 classrooms.

Grace participated in study abroad during her undergraduate years which contributed to her success and persistence as a student. Her participation in the program gave her the skills and knowledge to mentor other women of color interested in visiting other countries. Grace felt her mentorship was a valuable form of activism:

> Anytime that I encounter minority women, who are thinking of study abroad. I encourage them to go.… I motivate them to get out of their shell. A lot of people do not want to study abroad because there is fear, specifically because they have never left the country. Some people's parents have never left the state. In those cases, I just tell them to study abroad will change your life in general. I tell this to everyone, but especially minority women because it opens up their frame of thinking…. I talk about how it transfigured my conceptions of privilege and identity. And ever since then, I've just been a poster child for it…. It's a part of activism in the sense of like, awakening people's perspectives. I'm big on that, in every facet of my life when I think about it. But it's spiritual, academic, cultural.

Grace intentionally cultivated the natural curiosity of her students and encouraged them to broaden their horizons. Getting students to think differently about traveling to new places expanded their opportunities. Being able to provide them with a means of personal growth and development outside of the classroom was, therefore, an enriching experience for Grace. Participating in activism also impacted the participants' experience as students in both positive and negative ways.

Impact of activism on the student experience. Nneka noted how her first year of professional school was overwhelming; a shortage of time inhibited her from partaking in activities she felt were meaningful. Nneka asserted that in a "prestige-oriented environment," it was very easy to just focus on gaining entry into a prominent firm and tuning out other parts of her reality. She recalled how transformative her involvement during her second year was and explained: "I mean it's just like made my experience far

more fulfilling than it was before." Nneka liked her engagement in the community, "because it kind of keeps me in check you know?" Anytime her view of was life was "distorted" and grades became everything, her activism reminded here that life existed outside of professional school: "It keeps me sane. And it keeps me humble. And it keeps me honest. And it just makes me happy too. So, I'm enjoying it." Finding a purpose outside of academics helped Nneka to refocus her energy and put things into perspective. Mary took the confidence she gained from speaking out in her professional career and used it to impact her student experience by improving discussions in the classroom.

The techniques Mary gained from having difficult dialogues with colleagues in the past were also effective during conversations that occurred in her courses. She explained she challenged her peers, professors, and administrators on the dominant ideologies they possessed because "usually like I feel like nobody has ever said this to you before. And that you're just like completely unaware. And, if I don't say it, you may never hear it." Mary further contended, "I may not change your mind, but at least I can say this to you, and you can no longer claim ignorance. You can no longer claim that like, you never thought about it that way." Mary sought to generate an awareness of larger systemic issues to those in her cohort because she wanted them to "do better." As Mary reformed the culture of her professional school from within, Jasmine engaged in protest outside of the university to bring an end to violence within the community.

During Jasmine's senior year in college she became deeply entrenched in the Ferguson movement against police brutality. Jasmine recognized the privilege they as students possessed and the lack of empathy many students had towards what was happening in their surroundings. She was frustrated by the apathetic attitudes the students maintained during their studies, even while, all around them, Black people were struggling to be heard and to survive every day. However, for her, coursework became

less of a priority: "At some point all my work became irrelevant." Instead of making them "read classic books" about Black struggle, her professors encouraged students to protest:

> We're [students]. Like, this stuff doesn't matter. Like, we can theorize about it all we want, but as soon as we walk out of this classroom what happens? And so, the professor was really amenable to that. And was like, y'all don't have to read…. this is history. It's being made. Go out and fight. Go, you know, do what the major is supposed to prepare you to do. And read the books later. We'll get to the books eventually…. we can't in good faith have class, doing this prestigious bourgeois thing when, as, as bodies, we could be useful somewhere else.

Jasmine respected her professors encouraging students to engage in the resistance movement happening in their city. She expressed that their flexibility helped her to finish her degree and still say "I'm not a cop-out for doing that." Jasmine's activism led her to a sense of reconciliation; although she was getting a degree from a distinguished institution, she was still working to dismantle the systematic racism that they perpetuated which was essential to her.

The participants' activism, which mostly occurred in educational settings, impacted their student experiences in different ways. There was a strong connection between activism and education with one often influencing the other, and vice versa. Aspects of their identity such as race and gender also affected how the women navigated the post-secondary environment and how they addressed their feelings of invisibility yet hypervisibility on campus.

Finding # 2: Race and Gender Influenced their Educational Activism and Experiences

Issues of marginalization were a primary reason for the participants' dissatisfaction with their graduate programs. Inappropriate behaviors or comments from their peers, faculty, or administrators made them feel unwelcome in many instances. There were moments when the participants weighed the costs of ignoring the macro or

microaggressions and chose not to engage. However, choosing to let things be was not always an option if they wanted to obtain the acknowledgment and respect they felt they deserved. Harper's statements summarized the women's sentiments best: "I'm used to being in spaces where it's not designed- created just for me. So, I'm used to going out and piecing together and making it myself." She then suggested, just being a Black person in a graduate school could be considered a form of activism, because "existing…. in a space that wasn't designed for you is defying the system." Within these systems, the women were both hypervisible and invisible at the same time.

Nneka attended an undergraduate institution where she felt a good sense of support from her peers regarding issues of racism and discrimination. However, while attending the professional school, she expressed, "I feel vividly Black. All the time. I feel… like I'm in space that wasn't created for me. And I think it's the nature of the building. Like how the portraits generally are full of White people." The typical demographic of faculty, students, and even professionals who visited the school were White, and Nneka further asserted the "[field] in general is created for White men." These circumstances, she indicated, "make me constantly, consciously aware of [the fact] that I am a Black woman." Because of this, Nneka brought representation on campus through the Getting Radical in the South (GRITS) conference; she explained, "Law students, academics, and community activists all [come] together to talk about different things that are happening, focused on the south." For Nneka, this was a fulling experience of her time in school because she had the opportunity to address the lack of diversity in her field.

Nicole also faced challenges akin to those of Nneka in her graduate program which was a primarily White discipline. There were only a few Black faculty members or students represented at institutions across the nation, and there were even less who were

Black women. Nicole argued "it is mind-blowing to me that I'm the only Black student and like, that doesn't seem to be an issue. Like no one addresses it. If I don't say anything, nobody's gonna say anything." When she brought her concerns to the administrators in her department, they acted as if they did not notice the lack of representation, to which she responded, "you didn't notice that I was the only Ph.D. student? Really? Ok." Nicole suggested, because of the exclusion they faced, it was rare to find women of color in grad school who were not engaged in research connected to their identities. Their White peers, on the other hand, could freely study topics that did not relate to their communities. Nicole asserted, however, "I don't have that luxury, and I don't know anybody else of color who has that luxury." She felt it would be a "disservice" to study anything "that couldn't be linked to identity or activism." She hoped that in the future things would change for Black women but expressed, "it's not gonna happen anytime soon."

Kai's frustrating experience in her master's program because of her race led her to take action and air her grievances to the chair of her department. She explained, "I organized a group of students and gave her their contact information, umm from students of color who want to talk about their experiences, and how this department can do better serving them." Kai also "checked professors" who did not treat her with respect. One professor intentionally gave her lower grades which Kai thought didn't seem right. Kai recalled approaching the professor to ask, "Can you give me your rationale of how you came up with this? And [the administration] exposed that she was grading off her feelings and not facts (laughs)." Kai chose to follow her instincts and challenge the unfair norms that existed in her classroom; her actions, in the end, proved beneficial. As illustrated, working to change their educational experience was a worthwhile cause for the participants. However, their successful progression towards their goals impacted their capacity to perform in other areas.

Finding # 3: Activism Required a Sacrifice of Time and Energy

To truly affect change in their graduate programs, the participants had to dedicate a considerable amount of time and energy. Sustaining their activism required a level of endurance and patience that they acquired over time. Sasha for instance, tried to make it a point to stay abreast of current events through social media. But from her observation of notable activists online Sasha determined that "Activism is um, it's work. It's a lot of work. It's a lot of emotional work." Keeping herself informed of the work happening in prominent movements distracted from her studies: "Sometimes I have to like, turn it off, just to give myself like a little mental break." Sasha further noted although her graduate program was very supportive of student activism, the staff in her department intentionally reminded her and her peers that they were students first. Gestures such as those from the administration helped Sasha remember that graduate school was itself a time consuming and exhaustive process. School was her ultimate priority.

Sherri likewise felt choosing school over protesting was necessary. She recalled being in a course where a professor asked students who participated in protests at the airport during the Trump administration's immigration ban:

> I was like we had a presentation to do for you this week (laughs). No, I did not go to the airport and protest. I wanted to. I saw it on Facebook. But no that did not happen. So yeah, especially when all that stuff was going down in the beginning of 2017, and there were all these protests popping up. It's like, I feel so isolated, 'cause I'm in academia. I'm reading about… social inequalities and learning about the importance of activism. But, I have to stay at home and read these books about these important things, but not actually be out in the streets protesting. So, school takes up a lot of time.

Sherri at times felt guilty for not being as involved in the work happening in her community. But she knew the limits of her capacity and chose to focus her activism in other areas closely aligned to her studies.

The participants' intimate connection to their activist scholarship also made the research process periodically difficult. Jasmine, for example, disclosed her study of Black women serial killers was a "tiring process." She then explained although the work was draining, the feeling was unlike normal feelings of fatigue:

> The difference being that like, this is what I've chosen to do. This is what I've chosen as my career. And [I] have always sort of branded myself as that Black chick who studies Black female serial killers. Um, and so, it's like I can't walk away from it. I don't wanna walk away from it. So how do I mentally not get tired. And how do I not allow the sort of horror of what I study, to like, jeopardize my mental health. And it's like, well, just don't write it down. [I] just don't re-inscribe what has happened. Um, and it sounds simple. Sometimes it's really hard though.

Jasmine, who had engaged in a significant amount of protest, knew the significance of self-care. She understood that it was ok to take a break from her research. One critical lesson she learned was, "You can walk away from it right now and no one's gonna judge you any differently for not staying in the fight. You fight what you can, and you don't fight what you can't." With any level of activism, the participants made sacrifices that impacted their student experience and their personal capacity. Despite the hardships they faced, they obtained new information, which they passed on to others to create more leaders.

Finding # 4: They Gained New Skills & Knowledge and Passed Them on to Others

During their activism experiences, each of the participants gained invaluable knowledge and skills which they applied to other areas of their lives. Learning about Black history and Black activism gave them insight into current social issues. As they grew more engaged in work within their institutions and communities, the participants soon acquired the tools needed to leave their legacy by educating and developing others who might follow in their footsteps.

In the early phases of her activism during college, Melissa immersed herself in several African history courses where she learned about the interconnectedness of Black histories across the world. She recalled how "her view and understanding of activism became a lot more diasporic" because of the experience. Melissa also spent several hours in the library during work study, reading about the activism of Black people. As a result of her newfound awareness, she was able to make correlations between the past and present: "I have the… history to literally say, wait a minute. We're still fighting for this in X generations? …. In this country, people are still fighting for this? I mean they were fighting for this in Ghana. And in Jamaica." Melissa's critical examination of Black struggles for liberation gave her the expertise and language to identify, analyze and address injustices which further inspired her activism. She later taught Black history to her high school students in order to disrupt traditional historical narratives on Black identity.

Mary's activities within and outside of the classroom similarly exposed her to new information which she employed within the educational setting. Mary's connection to a doctoral student in a graduate program initiated her involvement in opportunities where she could apply the theoretical knowledge she gained in her class to practical settings. Mary expressed she had not had someone to push her or challenge her in the ways her mentor did. She explained, "I was in class…. then I was also doing presentations and sitting on round tables. And talking about critical race theory. That was … my introduction to critical race theory through higher ed... [I] ended up co-authoring a book chapter." Mary's activist scholarship enhanced her oral and written communication skills, and also broadened her connections to others who desired to make change through their research.

Jasmine's participation in a non-violent direct-action training enhanced her emotional intelligence. She explained that people seldom think about what it truly means to be non-violent in violent or aggressive situations. Jasmine learned from the intense experience that not reacting to violence from others was not as easy as it seemed. She also received a few other valuable lessons:

> And so, not that anybody's tried to punch me in grad school, but I do think doing that training, and learning how to better channel, like, where your physical energy could go if you feel like you're under attack, has actually really helped with things like presentations, or critiques from committee members. Or, challenges from cohort-mates, where it's like, your instinct, which is right and valid, is to respond. [Your instinct] is to, I'm not gonna say antagonize, but in some ways, the instinct is to engage. And nonviolent direct-action training helped me figure out how not to engage… I just don't have to address it. I don't have to hear it. I don't have to [hear], like, nothing. And that's something that I wouldn't have done, before.

The ability to redirect negative energy was something Jasmine found useful and applied to situations where professionalism was necessary. Graduate students are frequently critiqued on their research, and the feedback is not always positive. The skills Jasmine learned could be used in scenarios where students may feel defensive of their work but need to maintain a palatable disposition. Each of the participants acknowledged the significance of what they had learned during their activist experiences and how this knowledge impacted their personal growth. They understood everyone did not receive the same developmental opportunities, and because of this, they made sure to impart the lessons they learned to others.

Passing it on. Giving back was a motto many of the participants incorporated into their personal lives. They accomplished this through acts such as building inclusive environments for their colleagues or peers. Because of Harper's experiences as one a few Black women in her program, creating a sense of belonging for other Black scholars was a significant part of her activism:

> It's really important for us as Black students or people to reach out to others who we see coming in, whether they're younger … or if you're working at a place and you see a new faculty or a new staff [say] 'come on in.' Like it's important to embrace and like, bring them in. Find out how you can help and how you can- how they can get their questions answered. And help them navigate. Like oh, you need to talk to this. Don't go over there. You know. I think it's important to do so, 'cause we all need that support.

Establishing a community for others to succeed was necessary for Harper as it helped to alleviate the separatism the women indicated existed within the Black community. The women also paid it forward through planting seeds of knowledge in others.

Kai's experiences in her undergraduate and graduate degree programs were not always positive, and at times proved very trying. She expressed that she was not vocal and often did not speak up for herself to get the resources she needed. Therefore, Kai prioritized teaching her students how to advocate for themselves. She asked students to identify the departments and offices on campus that were responsible for ensuring their success and found, "They had never really been asked that question. I had never been asked that question. And, usually, we look at higher education as this system that students come into, and kinda have to use their own autonomy." But she adamantly expressed to them, "everyone here works for you." She then expressed to them, "you have a right to be here…. you also have rights that are to be protected, to be supported. And if people violate them, you hold them accountable, and this is how you do it on the university's dime." Kai equipped her students with tools to obtain their equitable share of resources, regardless of the circumstances they encountered. She wanted them to have the agency to change unfavorable odds to outcomes of success.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER FIVE

This chapter provided the findings for this study, which examined the activism experiences of Black women graduate students. The information presented was based on

the results from an analysis of the data that emerged during responses to the research questions guiding the investigation. In total, there were 17 findings which are as follows: 1) defining activism is complex; 2) activism happens in different ways along a continuum; 3) activism comes with expectations 4) recognizing injustice and understanding identity; 5) learning and developing the language; 6) observing and testing the waters; 7) performing activism; 8) burnout and introspection; 9) reconciliation and expanded perspectives; 10) activism came with challenges and consequences; 11) personal characteristics shaped their activism; 12) the influence of others shaped their activism; and 13) social media influenced their activism; 14) activism and the student experience was interconnected and inseparable; 15) race and gender influenced their activism; 16) activism required a sacrifice of time and energy; and 17) they gained new skills and knowledge that they passed to others. The next chapter gives a summary discussion of the research findings in connection to the conceptual framework of the study and the literature. Chapter six also includes the significance and limitations of the study, recommendations for practice, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter Six – Discussion and Recommendations

Research investigating the experiences of Black women in higher education has illustrated the difficulties and challenges these student face as they pursue undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree (Alexander & Hermann, 2015; Ellis, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Lewis et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2005). Though these studies have provided useful insight into the strategies and methods Black women graduate students use to cope with or alleviate the traumatic effects of discrimination and marginalization on their campuses (Robinson, 2013; Schwartz et al., 2003; Shavers & Moore, 2014), there remained a need to understand how these women engaged in efforts to transform their campus and their communities. This study therefore explored the activism of Black women graduate students to examine how they defined the term, how they described their experiences, and what impact their activism had on the student experience.

The previous chapter presented the findings related to the activism experiences of Black women graduate students. This chapter furthers the discussion for each of the findings and additionally incorporates the conceptual framework for this research regarding the dimensions of Black women's activism (Collins, 2009). Connections are made between the themes for each research question and Collins' broader discourse on activism to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the women's efforts to affect change. In addition, the chapter continues with findings related to the literature, the limitations and the significance of the study. The chapter then concludes with recommendations for practice and future research.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from this study collectively illuminated the core essence of the activism experiences of Black women graduate students. Through their compelling narratives, the participants revealed the complexity of activism in terms of how they defined the term and how they enacted activism within their daily lives. The women's view activism as fluid and adaptable contributed to their willingness to use their informal power to address what they felt were unfair conditions within their spheres of influence (Collins, 2009). According to Collins,

> Prevailing definitions of political activism and resistance misunderstand the meaning of these concepts in Black women's lives. Social science research typically focuses on public, official, visible political activity even though unofficial, private, and seemingly invisible spheres of social life and organization may be equally important. (p. 217)

A recurring theme of note that supported the literature was the participants use of less visible forms of activism to generate change. They primarily focused their acts of resistance in spaces such as their home, their educational institutions, and in their communities.

The participants' activism however did not develop overnight but was cultivated from a young age. Their progression through a series of phases influenced how the participants' perspectives on activism and how they chose to engage in the work of improving future outcomes for their race. As the participants developed a critical consciousness of the world around them, they became more confident in their ability to express the opinions on concerning matters in society. Having a greater knowledge and awareness of larger systems of oppression eventually led the participants to take measures that would help resolve these issues. Observing others was a key component of

their increased involvement in activist causes. While some of the participants engaged in more physical acts of protest, others chose to use their roles in organizations on campus and in the community to address injustice and to establish inclusive cultures. The personal beliefs and values of the participants, as well as the inspiration and encouragement they received from others, were also sources of influence for their activism.

In spite of their efforts to do good, the women still faced a multitude of challenges and some consequences during their struggle to work against personal and institutional discrimination. They later used the lessons learned from these situations to navigate the organizational politics that manifested in other areas of their lives. They additionally taught others how to use their agency to generate change. Collins (2009), in discussing the legacy of historical Black women's activism, stated, "it remains to be seen whether African-American women's response to contemporary challenges will follow their lead and create new ways to 'lift as we climb" (p. 241). The following in-depth discussion of findings from this study demonstrates that Black women have indeed heeded the advice and wisdom of those who came before them in their work to advance the Black community.

Findings for Research Question One

The first research question for this study investigated how Black women graduate students defined activism. The findings for this question were as follows: 1) defining activism is complex; 2) activism happens in different ways along a continuum; 3) activism comes with expectations. Overall, the process of defining the term was fluid and complex for the participants. The findings showed their ideas of activism were not stagnant or unchanging. Having the ability to envision activism as an evolving concept

seemed to be an asset for the participants. Expanding their perspectives on activism and how they could engage in it allowed them to tailor their activism in ways that aligned with their personal beliefs and values. They were also able to address the specific needs of the populations they served in a manner that suited their individual skills and talents.

Although there was not strict definition to which the participants adhered to, there were shared similarities between how the women defined the concept. For example, the necessity of improving society through change was a common thread which linked the participants' individual interpretations of activism. The change they referenced could be achieved through several means, including "advocacy" for others and "pushing back" against systems. Activism according to the participants was something that could be done individually and collectively for communities to which they had personal connections. The levels and types of activism the participants described could essentially be placed along a continuum. For example, individuals who participated in change efforts for a season were considered necessary within movements. Yet, along a continuum, their level of engagement would be different in comparison to others who chose to commit their lives to the work of bettering society. In addition, the participants characterized some individuals as more radical in their approach to activism, while others were labeled as more tempered (Myerson & Scully, 1995) because of their choice to work within the system.

As the participants attempted to form their own conceptualizations of activism, some of them initially had trouble placing themselves within an activist framework. At moments, it was difficult for them to separate their personal beliefs from ideas that had been instilled in them by outside influences. In several instances, the significance of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s rose to the forefront of the discussion when participants were asked about their initial conceptions of activism. However, they

explained current day movements such as Black Lives Matters disrupted these former notions of resistance.

The participants further alluded to the negative connotations of the term, which impacted how they viewed the role of an activist. They admitted that there were underlying expectations of individuals who identified as activists; not all of them were positive. The participants noted that those who openly accepted the title were either not permitted to make mistakes or were required to be an advocate for every cause, which ultimately was not possible. The level of judgment a person might be exposed to in the public eye was also not very appealing to the participants seemed like an added burden.

As the participants examined their preconceptions of activism, they began to deeply contemplate their relationship to the topic. Most of the women did not formally label themselves activists. Some of them, however, mentioned they would be fine if others described them in that way. Those who did self-identify as activists in the past now disassociated themselves from the title. This was perhaps, a result of their past experiences and the unrealistic responsibilities they felt a person assumed with the title. Overall, the unfavorable aspects of being an activist highly discouraged the participants from outwardly representing themselves as such.

Another noteworthy detail of the study emerged as several of the participants disclosed they could not recall ever having a guided, or formal discussion related to their personal interpretations of activism. Although they had not had engaged in intentional conversations about activism, the participants, as exemplified by the data, had a lot to say on the matter. Some of the women even expressed they were grateful for the opportunity to reflect and appreciated having the space to process their thoughts. In my opinion, the fact that the participants had not collectively gathered to have dialogues focused on their conceptions of activism, organizing, and resistance was unfortunate. Providing spaces for

Black women to freely participate in discourse regarding their daily struggles is essential. Collins (2009) suggested "this realm of relatively safe discourse, however, narrow, is a necessary condition for Black women's resistance" (p. 111). These organized events might give Black women the chance to decompress and debrief in ways that help to mitigate the isolation they encounter in when fighting for justice within exclusive institutions. The recognition of their labor and a celebration of their accomplishments is equally important.

Findings for Research Question Two

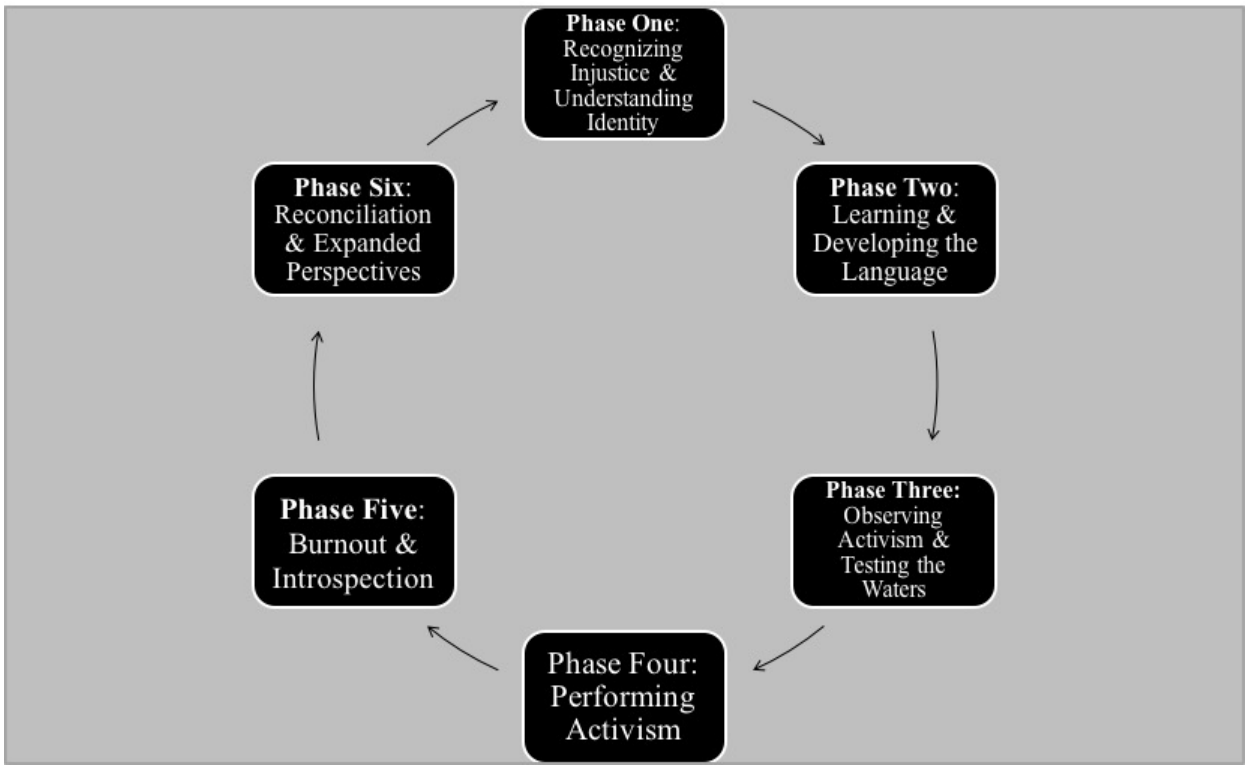
The second research question for this study examined how Black women graduate students described their activism experiences and those of others, including their peers, family members, leaders, and personal role models. Key findings one through six presented a series of phases the participants progressed through as they developed their current conceptions of activism: 1) recognizing injustice and understanding identity; 2) learning and developing the language; 3) observing activism and testing the waters; 4) performing activism; 5) burnout and introspection; and lastly 6) reconciliation and expanded perspectives. The collective of these phases of activism development represent a proposed conceptual model which explains the process Black women undergo to both understand and develop their own conceptualizations of activism. Discussions of findings seven describe the challenges and consequences of activism they encountered.

Phases of activism development: a proposed conceptual model. Throughout their lives, each of the women had a diverse set experiences that influenced their conceptions of activism. After analyzing data from the participants, there seemed to be common threads which connected each of their narratives to a larger framework. The patterns that emerged led to generation of a working conceptual model that explores how

the participants developed their current interpretations of activism and also how their engagement in activist efforts has evolved over time. The following themes provide a short explanation of each phase of the model which is illustrated in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1

Phases of Activism Development Model



Recognizing injustice and understanding identity. The participants' progression through this phase of the model seemed to occur from early on in their formative years until their completion of high school. Early on they were given candid lessons on the history of Black oppression in America and were also educated on the legacy of Black resistance. Their involvement within their schools, churches, and communities further exposed them to several situations in which they began to discern differences in the way

individuals were treated based on race and gender. Though the women knew there were things were not right in their surroundings, they did not yet know how articulate what they felt or observed. They recognized wrong but had not acquired the language to express their concerns.

Learning/developing the language. Once in college, the participants began to obtain a more in-depth knowledge from formal coursework related to topics such as Black identity, Black feminism and the Black political struggle. One interesting aspect of this finding was the fact that six out of twelve of the participants had either majored, minored, or taken courses in African or African American Studies during their undergraduate years. Each of those who engaged in these particular areas of learning expressed how influential they were in teaching them about themselves and the universal issues Black people experienced across the Black diaspora. The participants became equipped with tools to critically examine issues that were continually plaguing their communities. Their increased competency gave them the language and confidence to voice their concerns.

Observing activism and testing the waters. Participating in activist programs on campus or in their communities exposed the women to diverse groups of individuals who inspired them to take their own action. Testing the waters meant the participants engaged in activities that gave them the opportunity to observe and work alongside others who were more seasoned, and who were willing to serve as mentors. Their participation gave them a chance to figure out preferred methods for how they would later perform activism. As their expertise increased, the participants became more involved in involved in organizations that were addressing the injustices they could now distinctly identify.

Performing activism. Performing activism in terms of this model means executing or fulfilling a vision for change. Although there was not always a performative

element involved within the activism of the participants, the concept is used for specific reasons. Often when individuals (e.g. military personnel) discuss responsibilities connected to the survival or protection of others, they reference the completion of such tasks using the phrase "performing a duty." Many of the participants in this study felt they had an obligation to engage in work related to the survival of their race. Essentially, they were performing a duty, or performing activism, to save their lives, and to establish the possibility of a future for generations to come. Though these sentiments were not directly expressed by the participants, the strong narratives and the passion behind those narratives, combined with my own positionality as a Black woman, helped me to read beyond the data to uncover the things not spoken. Hence, my choice for the title of this phase became performing activism.

When the women engaged in their full-fledged activism, they did so at different stages of their lives for a variety of reasons. The activism of the participants was multifaceted and primarily involved communities to which they had a personal connection. This particular finding related in several ways to Collins' (2009) discussions on the historical activism of Black women. Collins explained how the women's first engagement in political activism began with their advocacy for specific groups. She then expressed once Black women recognized the interconnectedness of their oppressions, they understood the need for political action on a broader scale. Instead of dedicating their time to separate issues, Black women formed their own organizations that would address their specific needs. In this study many of the participants used their connections to particular populations to expand their work within their professional and educational systems. The types of activism the women described also exemplified both struggles for group survival and struggles for institutional transformation. Their efforts ranged from

engagement in physical protests to using their "seat at the table" as a means of changing harmful rules or policies.

Some of the participants used their roles as educators to teach youth about their cultures as a means to empower them. This finding further affirmed the literature regarding Black women's use of education as a strategy for group survival (Collins, 2009). Other participants in the study became active in movements within their cities and neighboring areas to respond to incessant violence within their communities. These actions for change were indicative of Collin's dimensions of Black women's activism, as they provided an example of struggles for institutional transformation through organized protest. The participants' desire to change discriminatory policies, and laws that unfairly punished or jeopardized individuals of color demonstrated an important point: "Black women have had an enduring interest not just in resisting racist and sexist laws and customs, but in changing a broad segment of the rules shaping American society" (p. 233). The reasoning behind the participants' activist endeavors was far-reaching, their end goal was the full transformation of society rather than temporary relief from the symptoms of a larger problem. The women's commitment to their causes were fruitful, but not without obstacles.

Burnout and introspection. Although, each of the participants were highly dedicated to their work, they eventually came to a point of exhaustion, or burnout. Constantly educating their peers on the harms caused by their problematic behavior, or frequently speaking out against wrongs they observed required a great deal of energy. As a result, the participants went through process of introspection and transition in which they assessed the limits of their capacity. Self-preservation became a priority for them, and they soon established boundaries for their work.

During their discussions a surprising focal point of conversation emerged. While the participants went through their periods of self-reflection they examined the relationship between their privilege and their activism. They began to recognize how their entitlement in certain areas influenced their freedom to engage in efforts for change. It became evident that the opportunities they were afforded were not always available to others. Essentially, being an activist was a privilege. The experiences of the participants coupled with a critical self-analysis led them to a new phase of activism.

Reconciliation and expanded perspectives. The participants in the study then arrived at a point of reconciliation, where they were able to mitigate the tensions between what they expected of themselves as activists, and what they were actually capable of. They ultimately gained new perspectives on how to engage in sustainable activism that allowed them to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Their overall conceptualizations of activism evolved and became more inclusive other forms of resistance. Additionally, the participants cultivated a stronger relationship between their activism and their personal, professional, and educational spheres. The fluidity of the definitions that were discussed in finding one seemed to be a result of their progression to this phase of the proposed model. Though this is the end of the proposed conceptual model, longitudinal research may reveal additional phases of activism development.

Concluding thoughts on proposed conceptual model. It was inspiring to see the transformative process the participants progressed through during the interview process. The proposed conceptual model that emerged from their narratives is significant in that it provides a useful guide for administrators, student affairs professionals, and faculty who interact with Black women graduate students, and possibly the larger population of Black women on college campuses. Having an awareness of this information could help college professionals to intervene in ways that promote the development of Black women's

activism. The next section continues the broader discussion on the findings for research question two.

Challenges and consequences. The participants encountered several challenges during their activist efforts including institutional and political challenges, contending with competing interests, and also navigating division, separatism, and judgment within the Black community. Institutional politics from administrators at times affected the participants' freedom, or ability to voice their opinions concerning matters on their campus. Some administrators worked against them to alter the content of their messages so that it was more appeasing to those who had either financial or authoritative power. The participants themselves also at times felt the need to adjust how they acted and behaved because they knew the consequences of going against organizational politics.

Tensions between speaking out, and protecting their livelihood were something the participants and their peers encountered, especially in professional settings. In the end, maintaining the status quo was seen as necessary if an individual wanted to get a job and also progress in their field. Although disheartening, this finding was not surprising, as several young Black women have told me stories of their struggle to be authentic and committed to the work while acquiescing to the norms of their institutions.

Finding support from others in the Black community was necessary for the participants. However, even in these spaces, the women explained how differences in foundational ideologies on resistance caused division and separatism. Comparisons between "old school" and "new school" ways of activism led some to judge the ways today's youth chose to organize movements. The use of social media outlets seemed to be the primary area of concern. Competition between individuals to attain more was also an issue noted as problematic. The findings for research question two provided a picture of

how the participants described their activism experiences. The following section gives comprehensive insight into the reasons for their engagement.

Findings for Research Question Three

Research question three investigated the factors that influenced the participants' activism including how and why they chose to engage in certain change efforts. Although they discussed several things that impacted their activism, their responses coincided with three main themes: 1) personal characteristics shaped their activism, 2) the influence of others shaped their activism and 3) social media influenced their activism.

The participants' personal attributes such as their personality, beliefs, and values either encouraged or discouraged them from taking part in certain types of activism. Some of the more introverted women expressed that they preferred to take a less noticeable role working behind the scenes. At least half of the participants were not willing to place their "body on the line" in terms of their participation in activism. Their reluctance to employ more physical measures of resistance mainly stemmed from their consideration of the consequences it might have on their families. The participants who were parents explained their obligations to their children outweighed putting themselves in danger for a cause.

Both of the participants who identified as parents considered nourishing their own children in ways that bolstered their identity as Black individuals as a form of activism. Their particular responses aligned with one of the dimensions of activism for the study, struggles for groups survival (Collins, 2009). Struggles for group survival, according to Collins, involved instances where Black women worked within their personal and professional spheres to undermine or resist oppressive structures and to create "independent and oppositional identities for African-American women" (Collins, 2009, p.

219). The process of validation further extended to the family unit, as Black women exerted their influence in ways that promote the self-valuation of their children. Not only were Black women nourishing mothers in the home, but they additionally serve as "othermothers" within their churches (Collins, p. 210). Two of the participants specifically referenced religion as a factor that influenced their activism. The church was a place where church mothers and other Black women supported and encouraged the participants. They also contributed to their positive identity development and gave them the motivation to continue their fight against injustice.

The participants also had an innate desire to make change in their surroundings. They wanted others to have the same opportunities they did in regard to their educational and professional achievements. It was uncommon for the participants to see others like themselves in faculty of professional roles within their respective disciplines. The lack of diversity motivated them to serve as role models to other Black women in their fields. They essentially paid it forward to those following in their footsteps by becoming "othermothers" themselves (Collins, 2009, p. 210)

Several individuals influenced the participants' approach to their activist work. There were several famous leaders, past and present, who possessed characteristics they admired. These people became role models to the participants because of their contributions to the progression of the Black community. Many of the participants expressed that their family was also a source of empowerment. Accounts of their past involvement in Black struggle movements were inspirational. Not all of the participants, however, had the same experiences. In the households of two of the participants with immigrant parents, keeping their families together and safe outweighed their involvement in change organizations. The participants expressed that they understood the logic behind the decisions their parents made. Their experiences gave them a new appreciation for the

risks that other undocumented individuals assumed as they fought for policy changes at the national level.

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter also affected the participants activism in different ways. The use of these tools for activism was not always positively accepted. In fact, the terms "slacktivism" and "armchair" activism were labels given to these forms of resistance. Yet, the participants expressed the power of media outlets in organizing and spreading information to others. These online spaces were also useful when trying to connect to others or network.

Findings for Research Question Four

The fourth research question, which explored how the women's activism influenced their student experience, revealed four findings: 1) activism and the student experience were interconnected and inseparable; 2) race and gender influenced their educational activism and experiences; 3) activism required a sacrifice of time and energy; and 4) they gained new skills and knowledge and passed it on to others. Since the women were completing their graduate degrees, much of their activism was related to field of education. Advocating to increase representation was one strategy they used to address the unwelcoming culture at their institutions. The participants also used their expertise to teach students at the primary and higher education level an array of skills to succeed in their chosen disciplines or future careers.

When the participants engaged in activism efforts linked to their schooling, they expressed that the student experience was much more enriching. For some, engaging in community work prompted them to reflect on their purpose in life outside of school. Having difficult dialogues with participants' cohort members was also a necessary method for addressing the stereotypical misconceptions of Black women their peers held.

One participant expressed that her classmates were unwilling to acknowledge the systematic oppression that people of color were combating right near the university walls. Conversely, fighting for a population to which she was deeply connected was a significant part of her undergraduate experience. She was able to affect change within a university she felt perpetuated systems of privilege and power. Because of activism, she was able to reconcile pursuing her degree at an elite institution that perpetuated the issues she was working against.

Race and gender emerged as factors that influenced the participants educational experiences and their activism. Being "vividly Black" or "the only" in "spaces not designed for them" was common. Additionally, the participants' connections to marginalized populations meant their research efforts were closely aligned to challenges these groups faced. The "luxury" of choosing other topics not related to their lived experiences did not exist for them. One participant who was not able to link her activism to her graduate work carried a sense of guilt for not being able to do so. She, however, intentionally found other ways of using her to unite her passions to affect change.

Balancing the time and energy required for educational responsibilities and activism was a dilemma for nearly all of the participants. Activism, as one participant described was "work." The hours they placed into their scholarship and competed with the time they spent improving the campus climates of their institutions. The participants therefore learned how to integrate their activism and their scholarship in ways could significantly impact higher education.

The participants' involvement in activism taught them skills and knowledge which they were able to apply to the educational setting. They enhanced their competency in areas such as communication and emotional intelligence. The participants passed on what they learned to others to leave a legacy of individuals capable of leading

future social movements. Collins (2009) noted how "Black women's style of activism also reflects a belief that teaching people how to be self-reliant foster's more empowerment than teaching them how to follow" (p. 235). Likewise, the participants used their roles within education to give students the resources to strategize and organize in ways that met the specific needs of their community. This section gave a concise discussion of all the findings generated from this research. The next section discusses how the conceptual framework guiding this study related to the findings for this research.

Findings Related to the Conceptual Framework

The findings of this investigation were additionally analyzed using the conceptual framework for this study. Although connections between the findings and the conceptual framework have been alluded to throughout the chapter, this section reinforces those discussions. To reiterate, Collins (2009) asserted there are two dimensions of Black women's activism: struggles for group survival and struggles for group transformation. Struggles for group survival "consist of actions taken to create Black female spheres of influence within existing social structures" (p. 219). Struggles for institutional transformation are "those efforts to change discriminatory policies and procedures of government, schools, the workplace, the media, stores, and other social institutions" (p. 219). A combination of these methods was used by the participants as they engaged in individual and collective activist endeavors.

In her discussion on rethinking Black women's activism, Collins (2009) contended that Black women's indirect confrontation of unjust systems in society, "neither means that Black women eschew more visible forms of political protest, nor that community development activities constitute gender-appropriate terrain for Black women's activism" (p. 225). Rather, methods for resistance were centered in the

quotidian experiences of Black women's lives. The findings from this study largely affirmed the sentiments presented by Collins. The participants were not necessarily in positions of formal power, but they used their informal authority to challenge the institutional racism in their schools, churches and communities.

The themes within this study also affirmed many of Collin's (2009) observations regarding the relationship between family, community, and activism. Collins (2009) contended, "while prevailing academic approaches fragment social life by separating paid work from social reproduction, activism from mothering, and family from community, the ideas and actions of Black women community workers challenge these arrangements" (p. 237). To illustrate, the participants in this study who were parents centered much of their activism around their roles of mothers. Providing spaces that were inclusive of other parents and children of color was also important to one of the parents who had experienced racism with some of her breastfeeding groups. Both parents prioritized validating and affirming their children's Black identities, so as to combat the negative stereotypes perpetuated in society.

The family unit for some of the participants went beyond the household and coalesced with the church. Those with spiritual backgrounds often discussed how their faith influenced their vision of change for society. One participant even alluded to the fact that the church has historically been "the needle" within the Black community that influenced how a lot of activism occurred. Since the significance of the church has changed over time, and the Black family unit has seemingly compromised by policies at the national level, it is important to consider the relevancy of these entities within modern day movements. Are they still considered to be the established hubs for strategizing and organizing within the Black community? If not, what is their new relationship to activism?

Educational institutions were also a significant area in which the participants used their talents and resources to advance the achievements of their race. Collins (2009) expressed, "because African American Women and men must function in schools and labor markets controlled by unsympathetic officials, Black women often find themselves working for institutional transformation" (p. 217). An examination of the formal and informal leadership roles the participants assumed revealed that changing systems from within was a priority for them. Because they existed within educational and professional settings in which they were not always welcomed, the participants had the opportunity to view situations using an "outsider-within" perspective (Collins, 2009). The participants who were privy to the organizational politics within their environments knew the importance of "maintaining a good reputation." Being characterized as a positive individual opened up opportunities for them to have "a seat at the table," and access to networks and resources that could elevate them to higher levels of authority. The more they progressed, the greater the odds were for them to influence policy in a more official capacity and to therefore transform their institutions.

Enhancements to conceptual framework. The contemporary resistance of the participants in this study affirmed the work of Collins (2009) on Black women's historical activism as illustrated by the findings from this research. Their engagement in their communities, as well as their discussion of scholarly activism done within their disciplines was reminiscent of the work of other famous Black women educators. This study further enhanced the conceptual framework in several ways. The findings for this study are unique in that literature related to Black women's resistance (Atwater, 2009; Collins, 2009; Guiffrida, 2005; Johnson, 2004; Loder-Jackson, 2012) has delved into the activism of women in the K-12 setting and the postsecondary level. Yet, the women referenced in the research are frequently teachers, faculty, or even administrators.

Although the Black women in these positions are marginalized, they possess a level of authority not afforded to graduate students.

The insightful contributions of the participants, however, provided a nuanced perspective on how resistance manifests within higher education from a graduate student perspective. Their progression to higher levels of status within their disciplines often depended on both how well they understood the political climate of their departments as well as how they managed relationships with those around them. Maintaining the privileges associated with being in premiere programs in tandem continuing their resistance efforts created precarious dynamics for the participants. They often had to make personal compromises related to what they were willing to challenge and what they chose to ignore.

The discussion of mental energy from this investigation also provides information that supplements the conceptual framework. Collins' (2009) dimensions of activism alludes to the how Black women have adapted their activism in response to external factors such as changing societal conditions. Yet, the framework does not take into consideration internal factors, such as burnout and introspection, that influence how Black women approach their activism. In addition, Collin's (2009) framework discusses the historical forms of activism of Black women. However, it does not directly address the process Black women progress through to as they develop their conceptualizations of activism and their personally tailored techniques for resistance. This research therefore contributed a proposed conceptual model, discussed earlier in the chapter, that enhances the intellectual thought on Black women's activism.

Findings Related to the Literature

The results of this study confirmed the research concerning Black women's discrimination experiences in higher education, the activism of students of color, and the activism of Black women in education. Though the number of Black women in higher education has continually increased, they remain an underrepresented population (Robinson, 2013). The participants frequently communicated their discontent with being the only, or one of few, Black women represented in their programs and on campus wide. Seeing others like themselves such as faculty or other women in undergraduate and graduate programs was not common. The fact that administrators or others in positions of authority chose not to acknowledge there was an issue at all frustrated the participants.

Similar to the studies related to discrimination against Black women in graduate education (Alexander & Hermann, 2015; Borum & Walker, 2012; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Shavers & Moore, 2014) the participants also experienced differential treatment from faculty and their peers due to their race and gender. Professors stereotyped them as less competent in several instances and therefore gave them lower grades. Some faculty members jeopardized the participants' ability to complete their assignments because of the instructor's resistance to giving timely feedback. For all of the participants, finding community was essential, because as Ellis (2001) also suggested in her study, they felt less of a connection to their masters or doctoral programs. This was perhaps because their peers were often either aloof to the struggles they faced, or wrongly judged them as too aggressive or assertive because of their mannerisms. Joseph's (2012) research examined the transition of Black women from HBCUs to PWIs during their graduate programs revealed the women who were affirmed and nurtured in their predominately Black environment, felt less welcomed in their majority White institution. Similarly, the one participant who attended an HBCU for her undergraduate and later a predominately

White institution (PWI) expressed that she went from a very supportive environment to one that was isolating and overwhelmingly White.

Gay (2004) alluded to the cultural taxation that Black students encountered because of their few numbers. As the participants in this study discussed their experiences with addressing the problematic climate of their departments, some indicated how taxing it was to bear the burden of fixing these challenges. They expressed the time spent with administrators to address issues related to Black students was time they could use to study or get ahead. Their White peers did not have worry about engaging in these conversations, which the participants felt were an added stress. Reliving the trauma of their experiences was further something the participants preferred to avoid.

According to several studies (Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Lewis et al., 2013; Schwartz et al., 2003) Black women have used various coping strategies to deal with the constant microaggressions they faced in the classroom. The participants similarly used different methods such as social or professional support groups (Lewis et al., 2013), their spiritual connections (Patton & Harper, 2003; Schwartz et al., 2003), mentors, and family (Patton, 2009; Patton & Harper, 2003) to help them contend with the challenges of being a Black individual in graduate school. The activism of the participants was also akin to the resistance of students of color discussed in the research and literature (Pearson, 2015; Sloan, 2016; Visser, 2015). During their undergraduate experiences, some the participants were involved in protests to create an awareness of the marginalization and isolation of students of color on campus. Others used social media outlets to voice their opinions and concerns on what was happening at their institutions and in society (Kenny, 2017).

The reasons the participants engaged in activism were likewise aligned with those found in the research of Szymanski and Lewis (2015). Race or cultural related stress was

indicative of the participants' desires to change their learning and professional environments. Support and guidance from faculty, staff, and administrators of color further influenced the participants, empowering them to use their agency to resist. This finding was complementary of Willison's (2016) research on the impact of "relational activism," or the establishment of long-term relationships between students and institutional authority working for social change.

Further, the participants' activism was reminiscent of the historical acts of resistance Black women educators and students implemented within the K-20 pipeline. They used their influence at individual and institutional levels to implement change as educators for the purpose of broadening the opportunities for others who shared their identities (Collins, 2009). Through acts such as othermothering and mentoring, the participants provided other Black women with tools and resources to advocate for themselves (Collins, 2009; Guiffrida, 2005). In the context of their student experience, the participants used the classroom setting as a space to engage their peers in difficult conversations or "talk back" against their differential treatment (Robinson, 2013).

The participants in this study benefited from their involvement in activism in various ways, a result which closely related to DeAngelo et al.'s (2016) study examining the impact of activism on student identity development. They participants in this study gained confidence in themselves as they became more engaged and increased their self-valuation during the process. Collins (2009) asserted,

> Unlike the controlling images developed for middle-class White women, the controlling images applied to Black women are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance. For U.S. Black women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined

> knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women's survival. (p. 111)

Participants in this research investigation frequently worked to invalidate the inaccurate narratives and tropes associated with Black women. Whether through their scholarship, or in their communities, the participants intentionally promoted positive conceptions of themselves. They also developed a greater level of "wokeness" (Ashlee et al., 2017) through their coursework in African and African American studies and their activist experiences. Learning about their historical roots and the powerful Black women leaders of the Black struggle provided them with much needed affirmation. Though this study enhanced the bodies of literature and research on Black women's activism, there are limitations which are discussed in the next section.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this study with one being the inability to make generalizations because of the qualitative methodology chosen for the research. The participants selected to be involved were purposefully chosen and represent only a small sample of the overall graduate demographic. Though their experiences may be similar to those of other graduate students, they are not necessarily applicable to a larger population. The students in this study were also primarily from fields within the social sciences with two representing professional schools. Therefore, the results present a limited set of perspectives that are not inclusive of students from other disciplines such as science, technology, mathematics, and engineering, as well as other professional school areas such as medicine, pharmacy, and nursing.

Additionally, this research is not inclusive of the perspectives of students at the undergraduate level. This study also only examined the student perspective and not the

activism experiences of Black women faculty or administrators. Although this study included the voices of individuals who identified as Black women, and one non-binary queer individual, the participants were not representative of the full spectrum of intersectional identities related to race, gender, and sexuality. Further, all of the participants who were selected attended one type of college institution. Different institutional types and climates might therefore yield disparate results from those of this investigation. In spite of the limitations, this study provided significant contributions to the field of higher education which are discussed in the following section.

SIGNIFICANCE

The findings from this study were significant as they gave insight into several important areas concerning the how, what, and why of Black women's activism. First, the research generated new perspectives on *how* Black individuals who identified as both women and non-binary define activism. The results also illustrated *what* forms of activism Black women engaged in within their personal spheres of influence (Collins, 2009). The participants provided rich compelling narratives about their experiences and the factors that influenced *why* they became involved in activism in their schools, professions, and communities. This study additionally enhanced the research on student activism in higher education, particularly at the graduate level.

From their stories, a potential conceptual framework emerged that explained the phases of activism development that Black women progress through during the development of their conceptualizations of activism. Collins' (2009) dimensions of activism gave a comprehensive explanation of the need to conceptualize Black women's activism in new ways. However, this research furthered the literature by highlighting the process that leads women to engage in activism, and to sustain their work. The study also

highlighted the contemporary activism of Black women in an era of movements such as Black Lives Matter. The findings revealed that participants used similar tactics and strategies compared to those of Black women in the past. Greater, but still limited, access to intuitions of higher education allowed the women to assume roles of influence as "outsiders-within" (Collins, 2009) to transform their learning and professional environments.

The physical, psychological and emotional distress of activism was another key finding of significance with certain implications for Black women, especially in graduate school. Studies have shown that graduate students are more likely to experience depression and anxiety (Flaherty, 2018). The burnout the participants experienced in this study from contending with personal and institutional discrimination indicated the necessity of mental health support for Black women, students of color, and graduate students. The results of this investigation provided important information which can improve practice and future research within the post-secondary context.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

Student activism, according to Rhoads (2016), has been a historical component of the student experience at universities. In the era of the Black Lives Matter Movement, students of color across the nation are coming together to engage in efforts to change their universities and society for the better (DeAngelo et al., 2016; Kenny, 2017; Nguyen, 2016; Pearson, 2015; Sloan, 2016; Visser, 2015; Wong & Greene, 2016). Providing support and direction to students participating in resistance efforts is therefore necessary in fostering their personal development. The recommendations for practice and policy, as follows, are reflective of the findings from the research as well as suggestions given by participants.

Recommendations for faculty, staff, and administration. The lack of representation of Black women faculty and students at their universities was disconcerting for the participants. They often alluded to the consequences of having low numbers of people of color on campus. Finding an advisor, mentor, or role model of the same race was difficult. The resistance of White faculty to provide guidance related to the completion of their coursework proved even more cumbersome. The presence of such barriers was concerning; the core of much of the participants' activism was connected to their research, which addressed topics linked to their intersectional identities. One recommendation for all faculty members is therefore to engage in a collaborative effort to develop mentoring skills that are effective for supporting and affirming students of color who engage in scholarly activism. The fact that there are currently few faculty of color in the academy indicates how relevant effective cross-racial mentoring is to student success (Reddick & Young, 2012).

Reddick and Young (2012) emphasized the significance of race-conscious mentoring practices in predominately White faculty environments. Race-conscious mentoring requires mentors to intentionally work to understand the impact of race on the lives of their students (Reddick & Young, 2012). The key to the success of this mentoring recommendation, in my opinion, is the ongoing facilitation of difficult conversations between faculty of all races. These discussions should be candid in their discourse concerning the effects of institutional discrimination on the daily lives of students of color. Although students may be welcomed into the discussions, faculty should take precautions to avoid creating a situation of cultural taxation (Gay 2004). Guided sessions which focus on uncovering deeply embedded biases might aid faculty in understanding how their underlying assumptions influence their expectations and presumptions about their students.

Staff and administrators on university campus also interact with students in a multitude of capacities. Professionals in administrative roles across campus are not always trained or knowledgeable in the areas of student development and mentoring. However, they are very critical in shaping the student experience for Black women graduate and undergraduate students alike. Having individuals in all spaces who have the capacity to mentor students across racial boundaries is essential. Understanding how Black women graduate students are affected by the treatment of staff and administrators might shed light on how inherent racial bias impacts the quality of service or level of support these students receive. Conversations on the significance of race and gender in the academy should be placed at the forefront when developing institutional policies for Black women graduate students and students of color. Doing so might clearly illuminate how their needs are either ignored or not addressed at all.

Discussions on the merit of particular types of research may also be useful. These sessions might reveal differences between the value placed on research pertaining to dominant and non-dominant populations. Having faculty who are able to help develop the scholarship of their students, regardless of the students' identity or research agendas, could significantly advance the progression of intellectual thought in the ivory tower.

Recommendations for student affairs. Student affairs units are very influential because of their interactions with students on a daily basis. Individuals in these offices serve as counselors and advisors who students seek for advice and guidance on issues that arise in their academic and personal lives. Because of their mentoring roles, professionals in these service areas have the opportunity to collaborate with students as they strategize effective ways to engage in activism that does not compromise their academic studies or psychological health. Making student organization advisors aware of the process Black women progress through as they develop their conceptions of activism is imperative. The

more knowledge student affairs professionals have regarding student activism, the more they might be able to intervene at critical stages with useful resources.

Multicultural engagement centers are one example of a student affairs unit that can play a vital role in the development of Black women's student activism. Centers such as these promote the intersectional identity development of students and provide opportunities for them to critically interrogate the assumptions they hold concerning the world around them. Having access to these spaces is important, particularly in the beginning phases of activism development for Black women. Multicultural centers are settings outside of the classroom where Black women can "learn the language" associated with the issues they have observed on their campus and in society. They are also communities that could facilitate open-ended dialogues on contemporary activism in the age of the Trump administration and Black Lives Matter. One participant suggested the idea of a having a course on activism or how to protest. She explained the class could allow students to "debate the ideas" of what it means to be an activist in this era. Having this educational initiative in multicultural units could be useful in helping Black women in college, and students of color overall, understand the complexities of being an activist.

Service-learning or community engagement centers should also be involved in educating students about the connection between their campuses and the community. Many of the participants' experiences in their communities helped them recognize the relationship between power and privilege. Understanding their entitlement as students influenced how the participants approached their activism, as it made them critically conscious of how their intuitions perpetuated the systematic issues their communities faced. Their desire to address these challenges led to their participation in various organizations outside of campus. Collaborations between university service-learning centers and community agencies is therefore necessary to give Black women in

undergraduate and graduate programs the opportunity to engage in intentional activities and programs that are culturally relevant and meaningful.

The creation and maintenance of Black graduate student networks or organizations could also assist Black women graduate students in the development and sustainment of their activism. Participants in the study noted how other like-minded individuals significantly influenced their activism. For this reason, encouraging Black women to become involved in cultural groups might help them find inspiration in people pursuing similar equity agendas. Additionally, Black graduate student networks, along with faculty and staff of color, could provide sessions or panels on how to navigate the politics of working for change within predominately White disciplines or professional environments. Lessons on tempered radicalism could be beneficial for Black women graduate students who are connected to their institutions but still feel the need to challenge the status quo (Myerson & Scully, 1995).

Recommendations for administrative policies. University administrators, with input from students, should establish clear policies regarding student activism on campus. Appropriate administrative responses to student protest should take into consideration theories and research on college student development. Institutions of higher education should also critically examine how they either promote of inhibit the activism of Black women graduate students. The following are important questions to guide their reflection: 1) How is my institution modeling the importance of service to or engagement with our surrounding community? 2) How are we handling student demands for change on campus in instances where we consider it "disruptive" to the learning environment? and 3) Are we cultivating an environment where students can learn and grow from their engagement in activism?

I also suggest the creation of policies that support and sustain funding for the recommendations proposed for student affairs and academic units. More resources are necessary to produce and implement effective programming. The following are additional areas where improvements could made to further cultivate a climate of activism among Black women.

All of the participants in the study expressed dealing with some form of burnout during their educational and activist experiences. The exhaustion often affected their mental, psychological, and emotional health. According to Flaherty (2018), research studies have shown a need to consider the implications of anxiety and depression among graduate students. Counseling and mental health centers, as a result, should be equipped with professionals who can support students from marginalized populations, as they are managing not only personal and academic challenges, but also the stresses related to their activist work.

Establishing systems and policies to increase the recruitment and hiring of staff of color is highly recommended; Black women, and other students of color may feel more of a connection to counselors with similar backgrounds. To be specific, increasing the number of Black women counselors at institutions of higher education is a must. Policies that not only acknowledge, but work toward an end outcome of having more Black representation in counseling centers is necessary. Funding is vital to support the hiring of new psychologists of color including designated salaries for at Black staff (prioritizing Black women) that is representative of the number of Black students on campus. Monetary support for programming for both Black women graduate and undergraduate students.

Ease of access to counseling resources, including extended hour policies, would be useful for Black women graduate students and the general graduate student population

alike. Students in graduate programs often have obligations that may not allow for counseling sessions during normal working hours. Policies for the continuation of *free* counseling services is also necessary to prevent students with financial constraints, who are often also underrepresented, from opting out of using an essential service.

The implementation of policies that compensate Black women graduate students for their services in supporting the development or formation of culturally relevant programs is also imperative. As mentioned on several occasions, the activist work of Black women can be taxing, yet unrecognized. Compensation in the form of scholarships or income gives Black women graduate students the opportunity to maintain their livelihood while bettering their institutions. Hourly rates that are comparable to the pay for top graduate research assistants ($15-$25/hr) would not only be attractive to Black women graduate students but would indicate a true institutional validation of their knowledge and expertise in efforts to transform the climate of higher education. Policies that ensure proper credit is given to those who participate in university initiatives is critical. The endeavors of Black women graduate students should be formalized in a manner that could be placed on resumes and curriculum vitas and counted as service to the institution.

Developing and institutionalizing a research center that focuses on the experiences of Black women in the academy would be a monumental step forward in bettering the higher education environment. Hiring full-time faculty, staff, and administrators, and graduate students who represent the identities being studied is essential. The center should be used as an expert resource when creating or reviewing policies related to Black women students. The center should also be the hub for collaborative efforts that involve colleges, administrative services, and student services across campus. Funding of should be generated to support the first year of operations

with sustainable funding generated from a permanent endowment and annual capital campaigns. This section presented suggestions for practice and policy that can be implemented within institutions of higher education. The next section provides recommendations for future research.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to examine the activism experiences of Black women graduate students. While the research illustrated several important findings regarding their activism as well as their experiences in higher education, further exploration of this topic is needed. Suggestions for future research follow.

First, a longitudinal study on the activism of the participants five to ten years after their completion of graduate school is suggested. This investigation could shed light on how the perspectives of the individuals either changed or remained the same. Research in this area might additionally provide results that reinforce the current findings or illuminate new phases of activism development relevant to the preliminary model.

Understanding the activism experiences of Black women undergraduates could further present contemporary information regarding Black women's resistance. Including other student populations of color with intersectional identities in a study on activism could additionally contribute valuable findings to the body of literature concerning student protest and resistance. An awareness of the similarities and differences between varying student populations could help administrators, faculty, and staff to create inclusive initiatives and policies that support student activism. Research on how administrators, faculty and staff, interpret the activism of their students could help to give a complete picture of the conceptions of activism within post-secondary institutions.

Szymanski and Lewis' (2015) quantitative study examined the link between race related stress and racial identity as predictors of activism among Black students. A qualitative study investigating the influence of racial identity development on the activism experiences of Black students might extend their research. The proposed qualitative study could explore how student perceptions of activism and their level of engagement evolve during each phase of development.

Miller et al.'s (2017) research on self-care for diversity educators provided the inspiration for the next research recommendation. Burnout or exhaustion was something all of the participants faced during their engagement in activism. Therefore, exploring the methods of self-preservation and self-care they utilized to a greater extent could give much needed insight into the importance of psychological well-being in activism. The next section of the chapter presents concluding thoughts on the study.

CONCLUSION

My conceptualization of this study began two years ago in a Black studies methods course. It was not the original dissertation topic I had chosen to bring to full fruition. However, a gentle tug in my heart led me to seek out a research investigation that mattered to me and that was about individuals like me. After completing this study, I am glad that I chose to explore the activism experiences of Black women graduate students.

The findings of the study illustrated the value of the wisdom and knowledge of Black women. The definition of activism for the participants was one that evolved over time. Many of them alluded to the fluidity of the concept in that it could be adapted to meet their specific needs. The contemporary activism of the participants paralleled that of historical Black women. Yet, it also differed due to their access to resources such as

innovative technology and social media. The women encountered several challenges as they engaged in resistance efforts. However, they found new ways to approach their work within the educational realm. The connection between the student experience and activism was inseparable for the participants. Much of their research and scholarship focused on topics that addressed issues related to their personal identities. For some, studying anything else was not an option. The women were also intent on giving others the resources and knowledge to access the same opportunities they were given. Overall, although the resistance of the participants in this study was not always easy, one participant summed it up best in her statement: "I think I had somebody say to me once that [activism] is the beautiful struggle. And, you know, that's where your solace is. It's like the struggle, and it's real. But it's beautiful. And it's powerful."

Many of the participants' stories reminded me of my personal journey to this point in my life. Their narratives often gave me the motivation to push forward during my dissertation process. They also gave me inspiration to continue my work as a scholar-practitioner. This study reaffirmed my opinion that more research is needed on the experiences of Black women in higher education. Understanding their activism is a critical step in improving their experiences in society and in educational settings.

Appendices

APPENDIX A - INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Script for Verbal Consent During Interview

Purpose of Study
The overall purpose of this research endeavor is to examine the activism experiences of Black women graduate students. The aim of the study is to understand the forms of activism you engage in, the factors that influence your activism, any challenges you face and how you address those challenges.

What will happen during the interview?
This interview is scheduled for no longer than 1 hour in length and you may be asked to complete a follow-up interview with new questions or to clarify information from this interview. During this time, I will ask several questions regarding your personal and activism experiences. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop the interview at any time or not choose to answer a question should feel uncomfortable. There are no known risks for this study, however, here are resources for the Counseling and Mental Health Center, and the Office of Research and Compliance that you may use in case our discussions elicit an unexpected emotional response, or if you have any questions or concerns about the study. Should you choose to participate, you will be audio-recorded to accurately capture responses for transcription. The recordings will remain confidential and will be reviewed by only me for the purposes of the research process.

There are no direct benefits from this study; however, an opportunity to reflect on the topic of the study may garner personal growth and awareness. Compensation will also not be provided for this study. Please note, there is no penalty or loss of benefits for the termination, or your refusal to participate in this study.

Privacy and Confidentiality
Any information you provide throughout the research process will remain confidential. The interview files themselves will be kept in a secure University cloud file, and no personal identifiers will be linked to the interview transcriptions. Your identities will remain confidential through the use of pseudonyms. A master file with assigned pseudonyms will be stored securely separate from the interview data in Box. The data from your interviews may be used for future research purposes not mentioned within this study, however, the data will contain no identifying information that could be associated with you, or with your participation in this study.

Questions
Should you have questions or concerns to report, please contact the researcher, Tracie Lowe at 972-948-0379 or tracie.aj.lowe@gmail.com. For information regarding your rights as a research participant, or other questions or concerns with the study, contact the Office of Research Support and Compliance whose information is listed on the resource sheet provided to you.

I will now begin the recording and the interview. Before I begin with questioning, I would like for you to verify your consent for participation in this study. *[pause for verbal consent]* Do you have any questions before we start?

Interview 1 Protocol

Participant pseudonym: Date:
Gender pronouns:

1. Tell me a bit about your background.
    a. Tell me about your hometown?
    b. What are some formative experiences you felt shaped who you are today?
    c. Educational background?
    d. What year did you start your graduate program here at the University?

2. How did you arrive at this institution for graduate school? Can you tell me about your decision to attend this institution?

3. What comes to mind when you hear the word activism?

4. In your own words, how do you define the term activism?
    a. What factors do you feel influenced how you define the term activism today?
    b. Do you feel how you define activism would differ from how others define the term? Explain.

5. Can you give specific examples of your activist involvement (all facets) from your earlier years (high school or undergraduate) until you entered your graduate program here?
    a. What were these experiences like?
    b. What motivated you to become involved in these experiences?
    c. What were significant parts of the experiences that stood out to you?
    d. What challenges related to your activism experiences have you encountered?

6. Talk to me about your experiences here as a graduate student at this university.

a. Particularly, how have you negotiated being a Black woman graduate student at this university?
b. What parts of your experience stand out to you the most?
c. What challenges or obstacles have you faced and how have you addressed them?
d. Can you give specific examples of your activist involvement during your graduate career here at this university? In the city or surrounding community?
e. How did this activist involvement influence your graduate student experience?

7. Are there any other remarks or comments you would like to make?

Closing: Again, thank you for participating in the first interview. May I schedule a follow-up interview with you? If so, would you be willing to bring an artifact that you feel represents your activism? Should I need to reach you after the interview, how may I contact you best?

Interview 2 Protocol

Participant: Date:

Thank you for participating in the second part of this study. Again, the overall purpose of this research endeavor is to examine the activism experiences of Black women graduate students. The aim of the study is to understand the forms of activism you engage in, the factors that influence your activism, any challenges you face and how you address those challenges. Your identity will not be revealed in the data collected from this study. To facilitate capturing your responses, I would like to record our interview conversation again today. Only I will be privy to the recordings and all information will remain confidential. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time or not choose to answer a question should feel uncomfortable.

The interview should also last no longer than an hour. During this time, I will ask several follow-up questions regarding your personal and activism experiences. I will now begin the recording and the interview. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. During our last discussion, you defined in your own words what the term activism meant. *(Restate what their definition was to them.)* Is there anything you would like to add to that definition?

2. Tell me about the story of this artifact that you have brought and its significance.

a. How does this connect to your activist story?

3. Can you describe factors that have influenced your activism over time?

4. Are there any other remarks or comments you would like to make?

Closing

Again, thank you for participating in the full interview process. Should I need to follow up later with you regarding the study is this still the best contact information? Please feel free to contact me or the Office of Research Support and Compliance if you have any other questions regarding the study.

APPENDIX B - RESOURCE INFORMATION FOR STUDY

There are no known risks associated with this study. However, should any of the interview questions elicit an unwanted emotional response, you have the right to discontinue the interview. Below is contact information to the University Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC) which provides counseling, psychiatric, consultation, and prevention services that facilitate students' academic and life goals and enhance their personal growth and well-being.

Business Hours:
Monday thru Friday, 8:00am - 5:00pm
Appointment-Scheduling hours are Monday through Friday, 8:00am-12:00pm & 1:00pm-4:00pm
Phone:
Website:

If you have any other questions of concerns about this study, please feel free to contact the following:

Researcher Contract Information
Tracie Lowe
tracie.aj.lowe@gmail.com
972-948-0379

Office of Research Support and Compliance
Location:
Phone:
Email:

APPENDIX C - PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Hello,

My name is Tracie Lowe, and I am a doctoral student. I am currently looking to recruit participants for my dissertation research examining the activism experiences of Black women graduate students at your University. My qualitative study seeks to explore the efforts Black women graduate students engage to challenge and reduce institutional racism for the purpose of transforming or creating equity within the university and within their communities, as well as their experiences while engaging in different forms of activist work.

Participants in the study will be asked to participate in a 45-60-minute interview. All interviews will remain confidential throughout participation in the study. All participation is voluntary. If you are interested in participating or would like to nominate another individual to participate in the study, please contact Tracie Lowe (tracie.aj.lowe@gmail.com) to learn more about the study, or for questions or concerns. I will contact you soon after regarding your inquiry.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration!

Best,
Tracie

Tracie Lowe, Ph.D. Candidate
Program in Higher Education Leadership | College of Education
The University of Texas at Austin

APPENDIX D - DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE/SURVEY

Thank you for your participation in my study examining the activism experiences of Black women graduate students. The purpose of this survey is to collect demographic information from the participants for research purposes. The survey should take no longer than 5 minutes of your time. This information will remain confidential, and it will not be linked to you personally. Your response to each question is voluntary.

Please feel free to contact me via email (tracie.aj.lowe@gmail.com) or cell 972-948-0379 (Yes, I text) if you have any questions.

1. Race/ethnicity: Open-ended
2. Gender Identity: Open-ended
3. Nationality: Open-ended
4. Age: Open-ended
5. Hometown: Open-ended
6. College: Open-ended
7. Department (if applicable): Open-ended
8. Program of Study (if applicable): Open-ended
9. Are you a full-time or part-time student? Open-ended
10. Are you a master's, doctoral, or professional student? Open-ended
11. Do you consider yourself a first-generation student, or the first in your family to attend college? Are you a first-generation graduate student?
12. What is your current household income?
    a. Less than $25,000
    b. $25,000 to 34,000
    c. $35,000 to $49,000
    d. $50,000 to $74,000
    e. $75,000 to $99,000
    f. $100,000 to $149,000
    g. $150,000 or more
13. Partner Status (e.g., Single-Never Married, Married or Domestic Partnership, Widowed, Divorced, Separated, Other) – Open ended
14. Parental Status (e.g., children, legal guardian, etc.)
15. Political Affiliation
16. What is your parent's highest level of education?
17. Parent's Work Occupation

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